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## The Year In Music 2012



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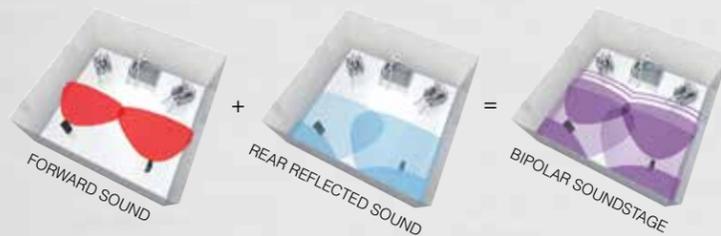
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## PUBLISHER'S LETTER

Welcome to our second "Year in Music" issue, where we've compiled all of our music reviews from the past year, along with our favorite live shows. We covered a lot of great music last year, and for those of you that don't just run right out and buy records the day they hit the shelves, it is our hope that this issue can help as a potential shopping list as well as a fun recap.

I'd like to take a minute to reflect on a recent major loss in the world of music. Claude Nobs, the founder of the Montreux Jazz Festival passed away on January 10, never regaining consciousness after a skiing accident on Dec 24, 2012. He was 76 years old.

Though Nobs was immortalized in the Deep Purple track, "Smoke on the Water," anyone who has attended the Montreux event knows what a major production it is, both in terms of scope and beauty. During the festival Nobs made his mountain top chalet available to the musicians and press around the clock with food, drinks and a place to relax in the middle of all the commotion.

I had the privilege to attend the festival and Nobs' home as a guest of Nagra in 2009, and will be forever grateful for the experience. As I mentioned in my show coverage, this chalet is as close to heaven on Earth as a music lover can get. The majestic grounds, framed by the Alps is equally intriguing indoors—every room has a major surround sound system and video system, playing current and classic Montreux performances with Nobs' collection of vintage MV Agusta motorcycles parked throughout the house.

The official statement on the festival's website was that Nobs' death "came by surprise as if to remind us once more, that in life as in music, each great performance could be the last one even if the show must go on." Here's to the continued success of the Montreux festival, if you haven't experienced it, you should. Don't wait.



# The Year In Rock and Pop

## 2012 Albums and Concerts

Vinyl madness continues to gain momentum, to the point where many music lovers are beginning to see the Compact Disc as the “antiquated format.” While still not possessing the ubiquitous catalog depth of physical media, high resolution downloads are becoming more acceptable (especially amongst audiophiles) and crawling forward with palatable titles.

The best news of all is the sheer amount of interesting offerings on the new music front, regardless of genre. Anyone thinking music has lost its muster just isn't paying attention. So whether you missed it the first time around, or would like to have all our reviews in one place to leave on your mobile device when shopping, we present it here again for your convenience.

We've also included the reviews of our favorite shows, and look forward to covering more live music in 2013.

Enjoy!

©Photo of Dave Mustaine by Mark Latham



# Iron Maiden

**First Midwestern Bank  
Amphitheatre**

Tinley Park, Illinois

By Bob Gendron

Photos by John McMurtrie

**I**mages of ice floes and blueish glaciers on backdrops conjured an arctic environment as Iron Maiden left onto the First Midwestern Bank Amphitheatre stage in Chicago for its full-blown revisitation of the 1988 “Seventh Son of a Seventh Son” tour, dubbed Maiden England. Alas, the subzero visions proved a wishful illusion. At the concert’s post-dusk start, the outside temperature stubbornly remained a sweltering 97 degrees. Dressed in a long coat, complete with tails, swashbuckling vocalist Bruce Dickinson looked as if he might drop from heat stroke, another casualty of the Midwest’s hottest summer on record.

## CONCERT

Yet the animated frontman and his longtime mates soldiered on, literally and figuratively, continuing to pen additional passages to their resurgent career's second chapter that began once Dickinson rejoined the group in 1999 after a seven-year hiatus. In the ensuing decade, strong studio albums have accompanied jaunts that alternate between celebrating the past and staking ties to the present. On the nostalgia front, Maiden England follows on the heels of 2008-2009's "Somewhere Back in Time" tour, a precedent-setting global trek that paid homage to 1984-1985's "World Slavery" outing and also witnessed the English ensemble jetting from continent to continent on a 757 piloted by Dickinson.

While he no longer hits the peaks of the inhuman air-raid highs on favorites such as "Aces High," Dickinson still operates as if 20 years younger than his 54-year-old age, continually pointing his fingers, leaping over monitors, sprinting from side to side, and violently swaying his arms—physically embodying the dramatic contours of the band's storyline narratives and dynamic shifts. At times, he resembled Vincent Price at his most sinisterly self-aware, a good-natured narrator of the mystical and misunderstood, a recorder of human fears and flaws. His madman cackles and piercing screams added to the thespian feel, furthered by elaborate scenery and props.



**At times, Dickinson resembled Vincent Price at his most sinisterly self-aware, a good-natured narrator of the mystical and misunderstood, a recorder of human fears and flaws.**

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Performing three-decade-old standards with the knife-in-your-back urgency of a group fresh out of a dingy London neighborhood, Maiden displayed the facets of a rare veteran act that balanced fun and relevance, chemistry and creativity.



Of course, fantasy symbolism, timely pyrotechnics, and animated reproductions of Eddie, the sextet's mascot, have played central roles in Maiden shows for decades. Whether they took the form of a giant, robotic, sword-wielding Eddie emerging to wreck havoc and duel with guitarist Janick Gers during a stampeding "Run to the Hills" or huge plumes of flames to reinforce the dark, back-alley terror of "Phantom of the Opera," visuals reinforced both the anthemic spectacle and musical theatricality.

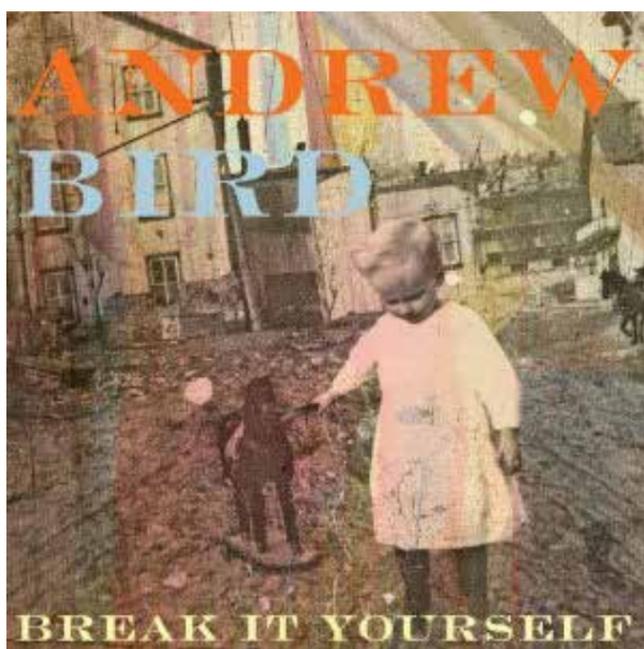
Owing to its insistent energy and melodic penchant, Maiden never put the material at risk of becoming overshadowed by the sensory-triggering devices. Tethered by Steve Harris' aluminum-flavored bass lines, tunes claimed magnificent arches of forceful heft, feverish momentum, and swift harmony. Rather than distract, elaborate graphic presentations complemented morality-testing tales of conflict ("Trooper," "Afraid to Shoot Strangers"), observations on cycles of life and death ("2 Minutes to Midnight"), and visions of prophecy and fate ("Seventh Son of a Seventh Son," "Can I Play With Madness").

Pleased the size of the arena allowed it to offer fans the full stage show—Dickinson castigated Milwaukee, where the band played the previous night, for an under-sized facility that prevented Maiden from unveiling several surprises—the group matched arrangements with effects. Prog-rock flourishes, galloping tempos, participatory chants, and regal marches coexisted with dry-ice fog, eyes-glowing monsters, smoke bombs, and foreboding lighting.

In portraying a mechanical Eddie with its head of fire, and performing three-decade-old standards ("The Number of the Beast") with the knife-in-your-back urgency of a group fresh out of a dingy London neighborhood, Maiden displayed the facets of a rare veteran act that balanced fun and relevance, chemistry and creativity. The group appeared to enjoy other's company and spark imaginations with no less enthusiasm than it did back during Reagan's first term, when Dickinson sported a lion's mane of hair and zealots accused the band of Satanism.

Then again, some pursuits never grow stale, especially when life-size clairvoyant beasts that clutch a heart beating with alienesque offspring oversee the proceedings. ●

# New Releases



**Andrew Bird**

*Break It Yourself*

Mom + Pop, CD or 2LP



**O**

nstage, Andrew Bird is the musical equivalent of a magician that keeps audiences second-guessing the tricks of the trade. Bird causes notes to seemingly appear from nowhere, juggles multiple loops, remembers the orders in which passages get stitched together, and plays with a casual looseness that gives no whiff of the complexities associated with the tasks. The only time Bird displays any sense of fear is when he addresses the crowd. For all of his cultured prose and etymological vocabulary—to say nothing of his fearlessness of premiering in-the-works pieces before large audiences—he's a shy performer that prefers to communicate via song.

Photo by Cameron Wittig

*Burmester* 35  
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The modest approach—and Bird’s singular style of balancing singing, violin playing, whistling, looping, and guitar playing into sophisticated folk-derived music—serves the Chicago native well. He’s not mainstream. But in selling out theaters across the country and attracting audiences of all stripes, Bird sits atop a commercially successful and critically respected perch most indie artists would envy. Many female listeners swoon at the mention of his name; male counterparts admire his cool; nearly everybody stands enraptured by his classically influenced mélange of conversational pop, early jazz, gypsy swing, and traditional bossa nova.

Entering his second decade of making records under the solo banner, Bird captures on the enthralling *Break It Yourself* the equilibrium between bold eclecticism and cohesive melodicism flirted with on 2007’s *Armchair Apocrypha* and abandoned on 2009’s rather plain *Noble Beast*. The improvement might owe to trial-and-error development. Several tunes here date back to at least 2010, when Bird first tested them in concert.

With rare exception, the new songs intersect with intrepid wit, flittering harmonies, and romantic tissues. Better still, they are resoundingly human and incredibly aligned.

Unlike previous Bird efforts that, in spire of their virtuosity or catchiness, often sprawl or utilize quirkiness as a defense mechanism, *Break It Yourself* retains both a concision and emotionalism essential to the music functioning as fully developed songs rather than intriguing showpieces. Bird’s multi-instrumental hallmarks—nimble arpeggios, pizzicato plucking, tapped xylophone lines, fluttering violin rejoinders, tip-toeing string passages—and whip-smart lyrical rejoinders have seldom sounded so through-composed. Pensive flourishes, impeccable timing, and jaunty accompaniment, too, contribute to the accessibility and adventurousness. So does the fact that the largely relaxed material is recorded live, with scant overdubs, in Bird’s barn. Unforced and inviting, the band’s output ripples with organic textures and natural reverb.

Primarily consumed with heartbreak and loneliness, and approaching such themes from freshly

original metaphorical and philosophical viewpoints, Bird revels in pairing introspective questions and rhyming couplets amidst contemporary jigs, sweeping waltzes, and country shuffles. A falsetto lilt and gorgeous finish lift “Desperation Breeds...” out of an initial fog. The playful hypnotism of “Give It Away” rises and falls against a stilt-walking bass line. Slight trembling and turbulence frame a brief psychedelic episode during “Eyeoneye,” underscored with rock urgency and responsive background vocals.

Bird’s command of textures and pacing cannot be overstated. He tangos on “Orpheo Looks Back” while charming with a delicacy usually associated with a professional glass blower. “Dance Caribe” gets away with a calypso beat and breaks out into a clog-heel-kicking hoedown. Gentle percussive crashes and vocal ache color “Lusitania,” the accents serving as symbols for a ship smashing into the shore.

Disaster, despair, dissonance: Bird still hasn’t found the answers to many of life’s bigger mysteries, but in finding joy in altering perceptions and defeating conventions, he’s never been so convincing.

—**Bob Gendron**



### Lost in the Trees

*A Church That Fits Our Needs*  
Anti-, CD or LP

Images of religion and nature dominate, wrapping Picker's meditations on isolation and panic in near-biblical trappings.

**F**our songs into its second album, Chapel Hill-based Lost in the Trees offers an orchestral arrangement that almost approaches the grandeur of an overture. A trickle of piano notes gives way to a continuously building string arrangement, and by the two-minute mark of "Icy River," the give-and-take countermelodies open up numerous tangents. It feels less like a rock song than it does a sampling of classical-inspired themes—an imaginary score created not to accentuate the vocal path of Lost in the Trees architect Ari Picker but to illustrate his words with an entirely new world.

Picker doesn't write songs so much as craft aural escapes. The clickety-clack rhythms of "Neither Here Nor There" sound as if they belong to a creature that exists only in a Grimm's fairy tale, while the lost-in-the-winds backing vocals and foreboding violins of "Garden" are as fanciful as any Danny Elfman/Tim Burton collaboration. Images of religion and nature dominate, wrapping Picker's meditations on isolation and panic in near-biblical trappings. Vocally, however, Picker comes from the Thom Yorke school of singing, and it's easy to let his upper-registry voice fade into the tapestry.



Photo by D.L. Andersen

Spend a little time with *A Church That Fits Our Needs* and it's no wonder Picker studied film composition at the Berklee College of Music.

Signed to L.A.-based Anti- Records, the adventurous offshoot of Epitaph Records that works with the likes of Tom Waits, Wilco, and Neko Case, among others, Lost in the Trees is largely a collective centered on Picker. In the hands of a lesser arranger, these folk-based tunes with woody visions would be hushed, backwoods stuff. Yet spend a little time with *A Church That Fits Our Needs* and it's no wonder Picker studied film composition at the Berklee College of Music.

Much of what will be written about this album will likely focus on its inspiration. The song cycle—one on which the strings, harps, and choir-like backing vocals interweave into the tracks rather than simply exist as pleasing additions, as they do on Lost in the Trees' 2010 debut—came about after Picker's mother committed suicide. Yet Picker isn't interested on dwelling on his thoughts so much as finding ways to color them. —**Todd Martens**

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**T**here are moments on Tanlines' debut full-length on which it seems as if the 11 songs on *Mixed Emotions* were recorded in a bedroom. As far as dance music is concerned, the duo of Jesse Cohen and Eric Emm can be sparse, quiet, and pensive, armed with the type of coming-of-age lyrics occasionally reserved for the coffeeshop set. Placing that bedroom in a city, however, would be a more difficult task.



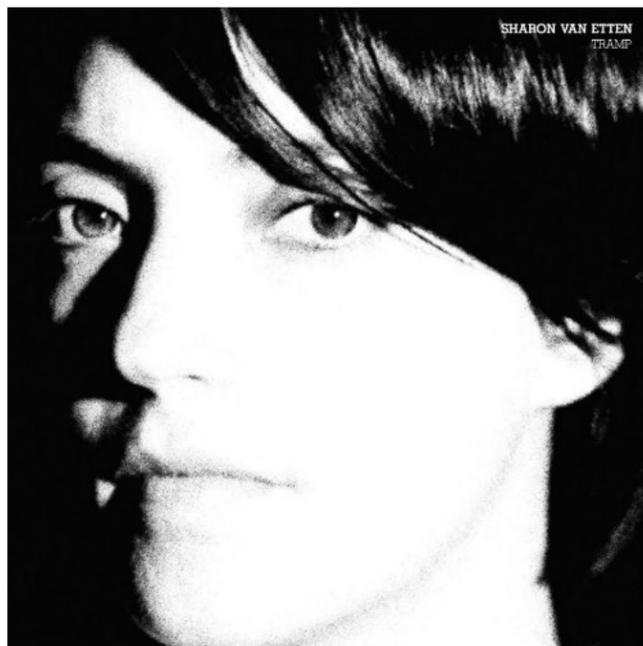
## Tanlines

*Mixed Emotions*

True Panther Sounds, CD or LP

A Google search and a label press release will tell you Tanlines hail from Brooklyn—the part of the borough responsible for the likes of Yeasayer and TV On the Radio, no doubt. Yet, akin to the aforementioned Yeasayer and Merrill Garbus' tUnE-yArDs, Tanlines take a worldly approach to the groove. There may, in fact, even be a steel drum (don't stop reading!) in "Real Life," but the duo uses the sound carefully. Rather than go the full-on island route, the clicks and clacks of a Tanlines rhythm represent more of an organized racket—an assemblage of various implements that can be found in a nearby alley or kitchen.

The synthesizer is the other main instrument of choice. Employed more lushly, as on a track like "Rain Delay," and the band recalls 1980s-era Genesis—and yes, that is indeed a compliment. More frequently, however, it's used as an accenting device. See, for instance, the airy beats on the keep-things-in-perspective mantra of "Yes Way" or one-size-doesn't-fit-all, snapping-fingers build of "Not the Same." Low-fi back-packers they may be, but Cohen and Emm still reach for pop universality.  
—Todd Martens



**Sharon Van Etten**

*Tramp*  
Jagjaguwar, CD or LP

**S**haron Van Etten provides many reasons why you wouldn't want to be her—or at least, in her first-person narrator's position—on the engrossing *Tramp*. The indie-rock songstress, whose excellent sophomore album, 2010's *Epic*, deals with loss and break-up in unsparing fashion, continues to extract anguish, anger, affection, and doubt from romantic misen-scenes. She sings of wanting scars to heal, taking risks, remaining confused, trying in vain, and entering into situations she realizes will end in tears.

Van Etten, however, never solicits pity or begs for pathos. Her refusal to remain on the sidelines, and flashing of a tough-skinned persona and bold intrepidity to love, gives listeners motives to pause, reflect, and ponder the scenarios that play out in her songs—painful or not. In an age of fleeting commitment and shielded identity, Van Etten comes across as one of her generation's mavericks for possessing the courage to fail, fortitude to project feelings, and sense to try all over again. Of course, it's entirely possible that every one of the twelve tunes on *Tramp* is purely fiction, or simply inspired by acquaintances and friends.

Yet the Brooklyn-based vocalist/guitarist makes each song intimately personal in a manner that, at the very minimum, contributes to the illusion that each is an introspective narrative. It's a trick parlayed by much of the best pop and rock artists, and assisted by the fact that Van Etten's measured timbre largely remains balanced between extremes of heartache, rage, and happiness. Swathed in gentle reverb, her singing occupies a divide between whispered murmur and full-throated confession, the last words of a verse often trailing off into an aurora borealis haze. Hers is a reluctant albeit necessary vulnerability, her observations and insights doubling as reactions and verdicts, soul-searching results indicative of difficult investigations.

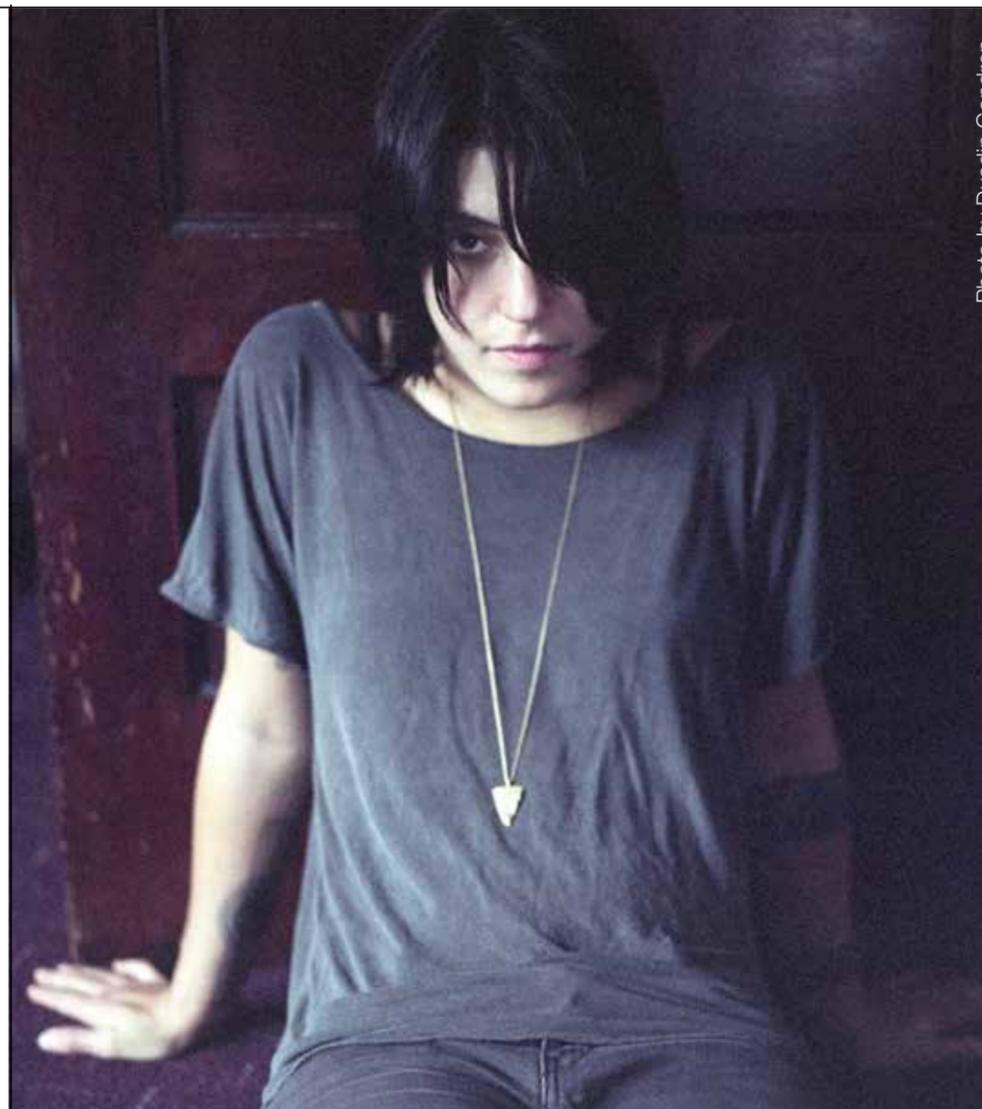


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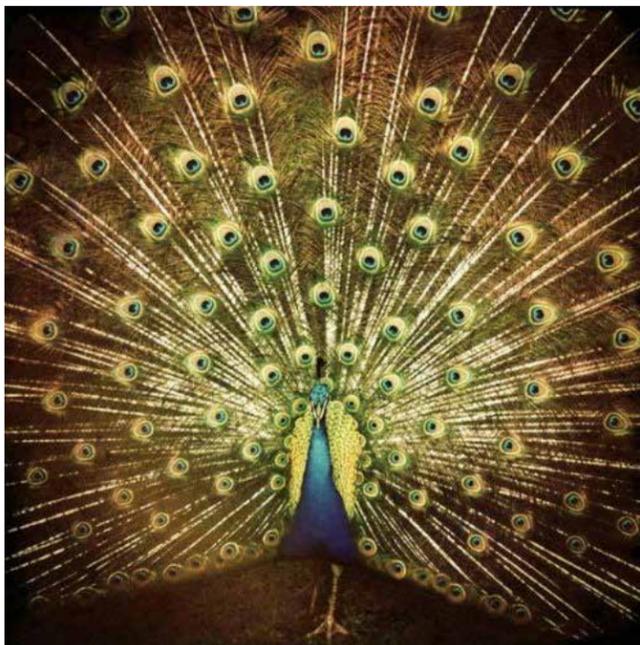
While Van Etten's periscopic details and metaphoric allusions don't come as any surprise, her newfound comfort with grander arrangements and larger-scale production makes *Tramp* a cohesively interactive and intertwined album. Isolated traits—such as the wet sound of a snare-drum head or pervasive ambient cues—cocoon her voice (and stories) in environments sympathetic to alluring melodies and deceptively complex instrumentation. On the vengeful "Serpents," a spooked three-minute episode during which Van Etten brilliantly accuses a wrongdoer of sucking on

dreams and strikes back by declaring she'll sleep with someone else instead, a steady series of pounding percussion and chiming guitar chords build, welcoming the sudden bursts of agitated catharsis.

Primarily, however, Van Etten settles for less direct expressions and cleverly percipient remarks. A light tambourine rattles amidst the mellow sensuality of "Give Out" on which the singer cites a man as the cause of her moving to a city and, in the same sentence, credits him as the reason she'll have to depart.

An organ introduction poises "All I Can" for its development into a quiet anthem, Van Etten's optimistic voice unspooling like a ribbon on a flywheel. Ambient flutter-and-wow shape "Joke or a Lie," words spilling off the tip of Van Etten's tongue on a composition imploring myriad interpretations. Is it a confession? A goodbye? A retort? All three? Reflecting the indeterminate nature of love itself, the New Jersey native treats emotional clusterfucks with degrees of obscurity, properties conveyed not only via doubting phrases but in the wispy manner her delicate voice transitions into a high-pitched coo—a naked falsetto at once sighing of relief and peaceably admitting fragility. Not that Van Etten doesn't know what she wants or deserves.

"I think I need more than the flowers and letters, man," she states on the piano-driven chamber pop of "Ask," searching for lastingness to cure ache as summoned memories, admissions, and situations pour salt in her wounds. On the very next song, "I'm Wrong," she buries herself in contradiction, thinking warped mind games and sweet little lies might lead to resolution even though it's quite clear she genuinely doesn't believe reconciliation will occur. It's hard to fault her logic or desire. And her route to contentment is a helluva lot cheaper than visiting a shrink. —**Bob Gendron**



### Ani DiFranco

*Which Side Are You On?*  
Righteous Babe Records, CD or LP

**T**hese are troubling times. High unemployment continues virtually unabated. Banks and corporations act with impunity while teachers and laborers remain under steady assault. One war is ramping up as a second slowly draws down. But unlike the Civil Rights movement (“A Change Is Gonna Come”), Vietnam War (“What’s Going On”), or even instances of police brutality in 1980s Los Angeles (“Fuck tha Police”), few modern musicians have been inspired to pen politically and/or socially charged tunes about the current unrest.

Into this void walks folkie Ani DiFranco, who turns portions of her first album since 2008’s *Red Letter Year* into a veritable soundtrack for the Occupy Wall Street movement. “They stole a few elections/Still we the people won/We voted out corruption and/Big corporations,” she sings on the fiery title track—an updated version of the 1931 pro-union protest anthem popularized by Pete Seeger, who appears here on banjo and backing vocals. “We voted for an end to war/New direction.”

Time and again on *Which Side Are You On?*, DiFranco calls out inaction and blind acceptance of the status quo, lashing out at political leaders (on “J,” she calls on President Obama to do more than “shift his weight”) and the populace at large, asking, “America, who are we?”

Answers don’t come easily, particularly on the album-opening “Life Boat.” The ode to her longtime home of New Orleans paints a picture of the city’s near-biblical Hurricane Katrina flooding (“This park bench is a lifeboat,” she sings atop watery electric guitar) and never-say-die spirit. This Crescent City influence stretches throughout, surfacing in the second-line skronk of “If Yr Not” and loping bossa nova groove of “Splinter.” “J,” meanwhile, paints a horrifying picture of oil-slicked birds and the countless miles of marshlands and gulf coastlines decimated by the BP oil spill.

While DiFranco sounds newly energized by contemporary events, she occasionally slips into liberal cliché, donning Birkenstocks for the acoustic shuffle “Promiscuity” (a momentum-sapping turn about the unnaturalness of monogamy) and pro-choice anthem “Amendment” (a tune whose clumsy lyrics overpower the admirable feminist concepts at its core). “And if you don’t like abortion,” she sings over flaccid acoustic picking, “don’t have an abortion.” Worst. Bumper sticker. Ever.

Still, credit the veteran singer-songwriter with having the *cajones* to tackle the countless issues threatening our fragile democracy. While DiFranco claims to have calmed on the leisurely “Unworry, singing, “I’ve become more peaceful,” she makes it clear elsewhere she’s still got plenty of fight left in her. —**Andy Downing**



### Rosie Thomas

*With Love*  
Sing-A-Long Records, CD

**N**ear the midpoint of Rosie Thomas’ sixth full-length studio album, the Michigan-born singer-songwriter spells out exactly what she’s looking for in a relationship, cooing, “I want the movies, and I want the love songs.” Fittingly, then, *With Love* arrives dense with allusions to big-screen-style romance, Thomas making lyrical reference to everything from *Jerry Maguire* (“Every part of me that’s missing he completes,” she sings on “Is This Love?”) to *The Wizard of Oz* (“Really Long Year” borrows, in part, from “Somewhere Over the Rainbow”).

Yet, despite its release date (the album is tied to Valentine’s Day) and Hallmark-greeting title, *With Love* isn’t as clean and tidy as most Hollywood happy endings. Thomas writes songs about being torn apart (“Back to Being Friends”) and thrown together (“2 Birds”), and there are far more questions than answers, as the sweet-voiced musician sings lines such as “What if it’s over?”; “If we went back to being friends what would it do?”; “Is this love? Can it be?”

But even during moments when Thomas’ emotions are scattered, the musical backdrop remains almost universally lovely. Gentle piano, delicate acoustic picking, and brushed drums flower like sun-kissed petals. This is true even on “Two Worlds Collide,” a numbing tune on which the singer describes a busted relationship using terminology usually reserved for sci-fi disaster flicks.

The album, recorded with Black Wescott and David Bazan, includes appearances from singer Jen Wood and Iron & Wine’s Sam Beam, who chips in with spectral oohs and ahs on the buoyant “Over the Moon.” However, Thomas remains the central figure. Her upbeat personality shines through even when she pours her broken heart out on “Sometimes Love”—a lazy “River” of a ballad that owes a heavy debt to Joni Mitchell.

Still, for all its beauty, one can’t help but wish Thomas would stretch out musically—or at least lash out on occasion. Instead, *With Love* is all rounded corners and sanded-down edges, emitting the same impurity-masking, soft-light glow in which Barbara Walters films all her interviews. In that regard, don’t be surprised when these songs start making the rounds on network television and providing a soundtrack for all the well-coifed, McDreamy doctors as they fall in and out of love. It’s not quite the movies to which Thomas aspires. But it’s as close as the singer-songwriter gets on the comfortable, comforting effort, which has its sights set on the stars but can’t quite free itself from an earthly pull. —**Andy Downing**

**R**eviewing Air's soundtrack to the restored silent film classic *Le Voyage Dans la Lune* (*A Trip to the Moon*) is not the easiest of tasks. At 35 minutes, it's a swift, playful affair, full of devilishly fun vintage sci-fi sound effects and a few triumphant turns on the piano. Yet divorced from the 1902 Georges Méliès film, the score, while largely a hoot, loses a tad of its retro-cool luster.

To be certain, "Astronomic Club" is a bizarre mix of human-like effects, synthetic trumpets, and booming rhythms that at once sound like two drums and an eerie tom-tom march. "Sonic Armada" could be an alternate score to Disney Tomorrowland staple Space Mountain. Even without Méliès' hopping-mad Martians and giant mushrooms, it's hard not to be taken with this surprisingly funky digital creation. Likewise, "Parade" is full of celebratory choirs and danceable electronic squeaks, complete with teasing breakdowns.

As a score, it's expertly composed. The title track is but 14 minutes, and there's no filler in Air's cinematic accompaniment. The latter manages to capture the majesty of Méliès' early film work and does so without sounding either too modern or slavish to the silent era.

There is, however, a wee bit of padding. It's hard to fault Air members Nicolas Godin and Jean-Benoit Dunckel for wanting to lengthen some tracks. But when Au Revoir Simone and Beach House's Victoria Legrand are added to the mix, their voices, though lovely, are jarring on this tightly focused collection. And there's no need to toss in a countdown on the intergalactic "Seven Stars."

Of course, by the time such late-album tracks manifest, Godin and Dunckel have again proven why they were the ones tasked with scoring such a revered work.—**Todd Martens**



**Air**  
*Le Voyage Dans la Lune*  
Astralwerks, CD

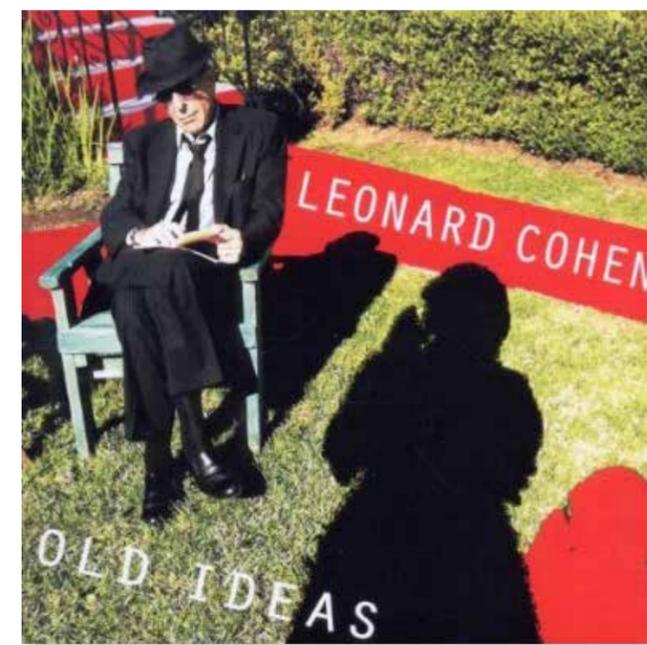


**T**he title of Leonard Cohen's latest album—his first since 2004's *Dear Heather*—applies not to his advanced age (the singer turned 77 in September) but to the musings on human frailty, religion, sexuality, and mortality that have defined his work since he gave up poetry for a music career when he was still in his 30s.

In those early days, Cohen was a relatively young man who merely sounded ancient, his voice conjuring Old Testament imagery even when he looked like an uncomfortable kid in his dad's suit. Nowadays he's grown fully into that glorious instrument—not to mention the finely tailored threads that have become his signature look. Indeed, if god has a singing voice, one would imagine it sounds something like Cohen's deep, gravelled baritone. It's a concept that doesn't seem outside the realms of possibility considering the Book of Revelations vibe that often runs through the Canadian native's best material.

Interestingly enough, *Old Ideas*, Cohen's finest work since 1988's *I'm Your Man*, opens with "Going Home," a graceful number that successfully punches a hole in this godly image. The singer chides himself as a "lazy bastard living in a suit" before surmising, "He will speak these words of wisdom/Like a sage, a man of vision/Though he knows he's really nothing." While still a carnal being—"I ain't had much lovin' yet," he sings coyly on "Anyhow"—it's clear his fascination with the pleasures of the flesh have somewhat dulled with escalating age. "I'm tired of choosing desire," he sings pointedly atop minimal acoustic strumming on "Crazy to Love You."

Instead Cohen, who was born into Judaism and later lived in seclusion in a Zen monastery before being ordained a Buddhist monk, spends much of the album exploring more universal issues of spirituality. On "Amen" he sings of angels and vengeful gods, delivering his weighty words like Moses handing down the Ten Commandments.



**Leonard Cohen**  
*Old Ideas*  
Columbia, CD or 2LP

A softer side surfaces on "Come Healing," a string-kissed psalm awash in angelic female voices and subtle church organ.

The musical arrangements are carefully considered, framing Cohen's words rather than driving the action—a welcome departure from the drippy synthesizers that unfortunately defined his work for more than two decades. Perhaps inspired by two years of intensive touring, the singer stretches out, flirting with menacing blues ("Anyhow"), dusty Ennio Morricone film scores ("Lullaby"), and shuffling country rock ("Banjo").

Throughout, Cohen sounds keenly aware of his own mortality ("I know my days are few," he cautions on "Anyhow"), making Bob Dylan's 1997 album *Time Out of Mind* a clear reference point. Still, the singer-songwriter doesn't sound like he's settling up his earthly affairs in anticipation of that final journey, whatever form it might take. If anything, his curiosity, wit, and humor have only been sharpened by the passing of time. Consider *Old Ideas* more of a return to form than a parting shot of any kind. It's good to have you back, old friend. —**Andy Downing**



### Heartless Bastards

*Arrow*

Partisan, CD or LP



Photo by Nathan Presley

“Sometimes you just need, need a little help/On this long way home,” patiently drawls Erika Wennerstrom on the slow-fuse ignition of “Marathon,” the spacious opener to Heartless Bastards’ fourth album. The declaration represents a thematic reversal for the straw-blond singer/guitarist and her veteran group. Whereas 2009’s *The Mountain* found her asserting a drifter’s independence and bleeding dry from her veins poisoned memories left behind by a failed relationship, she makes frequent references to home, optimism, and comfort on *Arrow*, the ensemble’s most well-rounded and confident effort.

Having initially turned heads with 2005’s critically acclaimed *Stairs and Elevators*, the collective began in Ohio as a rough-and-tumble garage band and steadily evolved into a group that also draws from folk, pop, and soul. Despite promise, widespread recognition remained evasive. Parallels to fellow Buckeye State natives the Black Keys followed yet often missed the point, as the two groups share bluesy roots and geographical identities but little else.

As the band’s lone remaining original member, Wennerstrom stands as the principal attraction—and for obvious reason. Armed with a smoky, husky, and occasionally

masculine timbre possessing the marbled composition of a porterhouse steak, she lays claim to an arresting instrument on par with any of her female contemporaries—EMA, Teri Suarez, Merrill Garbus—that emerged last year. She occupies a neutral territory that’s equally tough-minded and sympathetic, the attitude and sound not unlike those of a take-no-guff woman bartender who calls regulars “honey” but drags drunken pricks out by their ear. Hers is an unpolished, non-sanded delivery, all the better to rub up against the gritty guitar chords and Marshall amplifier romp that courses through the music.

Newly expanded to a quartet, Heartless Bastards complement her variety of curled words, swooping refrains, and dizzy falsetto spins with two guitars engaged in cat-and-mouse games of hide and seek. Percussion, too, is vastly expanded, not to simply provide sharp backbeats and racing clatter but to instill texture and atmosphere, whether it be the dramatic resonance of large ride cymbals mimicking waves crashing up against limestone walls or repeat drum rolls establishing a momentous foundation around which melodic guitar lines wrap like ivy.

Primarily recorded live in the studio with few overdubs, the songs retain a D.I.Y. feel without sacrificing a put-together coherency. Wennerstrom puts listeners on the edge of an imaginary desert cliff during the Spaghetti Western cowpoke “The Arrow That Killed the Beast,” singing at a leisurely pace before opening up her lungs, taking in air, and seemingly swallowing a surrounding canyon. Swampy acoustic strumming and clip-clopping hand drums inform the ramble-on “Skin and Bones,” one of myriad tunes benefiting from the addition of second guitarist Mark Nathan. His riffs on “Got to Have Rock and Roll” allow the promissory statement to double as the spawn of Big Star’s “In the Street.”

For all the crunch and sway, the elasticity is built around Wennerstrom’s sticky-caramel phrasing. It’s in full force on “Parted Ways,” a bounding glam-accented shot of reality-grounded positivism that, akin to the bulk of *Arrow*, comes on like the celebratory rock n’ roll return of a prodigal daughter. —**Bob Gendron**

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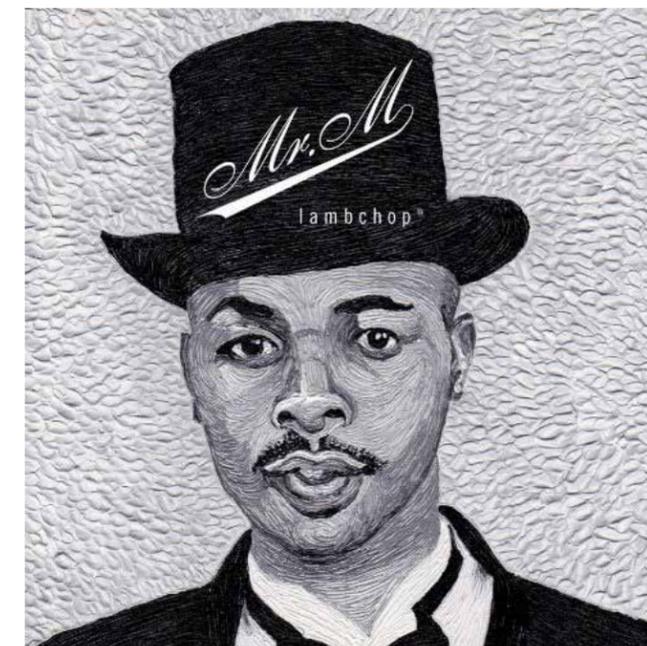
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**L**ambchop's eleventh full-length studio album opens with a grandiose swell of celestial string that slowly arching skyward—only to be pulled back down to earth the moment frontman Kurt Wagner opens his mouth. “Don’t know what the fuck they talk about,” he shrugs in his usual clipped delivery. And so it goes on a record that frequently pairs the kind of ornate, sweeping orchestration that would have Burt Bacharach salivating and Wagner’s hardscrabble words, which often sound culled from back issues of Harvey Pekar’s workingman’s chronicle *American Splendor*. On “Buttons,” for one, a sad-sack tale soundtracked by solemn violin, Wagner sings (well, speaks, really) about a blue-collar schlub stuck picking up trash on the highway as his life continues to pass him by.

Prior to starting work on *Mr. M*, Wagner set aside music in favor of painting. His decision followed the death of his friend and fellow artist, Vic Chestnutt, who passed away Christmas Day 2009. The specter of his loss hangs over heart-heavy songs like “2B2,” a slow, shuffling ditty about the challenges of connecting with humanity. Similar sentiments surface on the acoustic lament “Nice Without Mercy,” and it’s impossible to think the singer didn’t have Chestnutt in mind when he penned the line “God comes and gathers up his jewels.”

Elsewhere, the band toys with lounge-y instrumentals (“Gar”), jaunty piano numbers involving characters just trying to survive (“Gone Tomorrow,”



## Lambchop

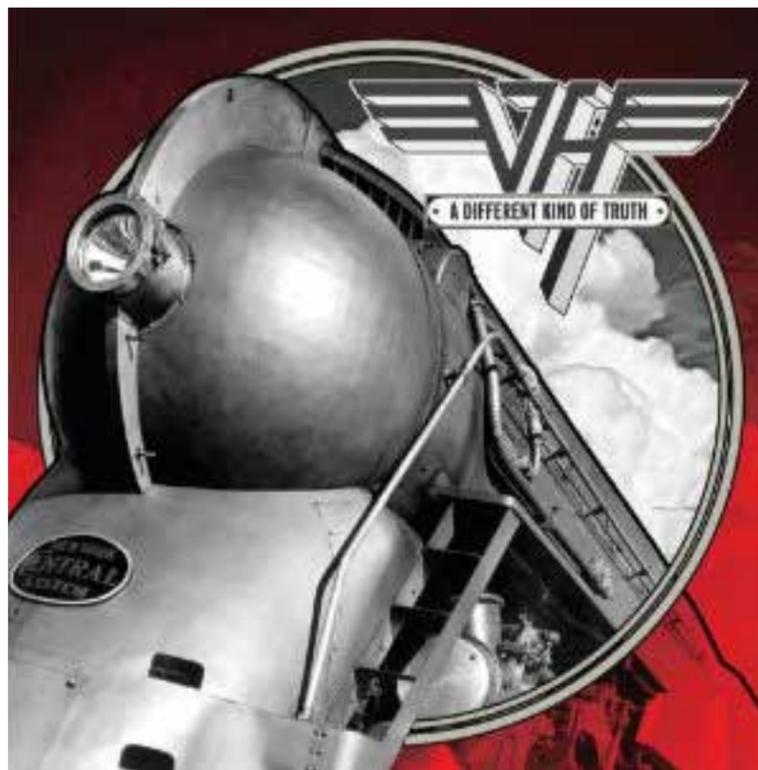
*Mr. M*

Merge Records, CD or 2LP

which plays like a musical version of Ramin Bahrani’s *Chop Shop*), and cryptic love tunes that sound more resigned to a fate than embracing it (“Never My Love”).

This is definitely an album that rewards patience; more than half of *Mr. M*’s 11 cuts clock in at more than five minutes. “Mr. Met” stretches out over seven-plus leisurely minutes, piling on airy strings, the hazy thrum of an acoustic guitar, and brushed drums that mimic shuffling footsteps. At times, the approach makes for a challenging listen, particularly on the instrumental “Betty’s Overture,” a three-minute interlude that feels like it takes nearly four times as long to finish. Similar atrophy seeps into “Kind Of.”

Still, Wagner and Co. haven’t sounded so focused in years, and there’s something beautiful in the way the frontman lurches down cracked sidewalks and tosses himself into gutters for lyrical inspiration—even on an album on which the music aspires to play in the country’s most pristine orchestra halls. —**Andy Downing**



### Van Halen

*A Different Kind of Truth*  
Interscope, CD or 2LP

**D**avid Lee Roth might have a bright future as the replacement for William Shatner in Priceline commercials. The flamboyant vocalist and natural-born pitchman takes spoken-word turns on several occasions throughout *A Different Kind of Truth*, going into character with an exaggerated low-register timbre that harkens back to his narrative role on “Panama.” Yet whereas Roth sounds credible on the latter, a youthful California-tanned playboy salivating as he ogles a bikini-clad woman during the me-first hedonism of the 80s, he now comes across like an older man reading words off cue cards, uncertain as to whether he should play up the script or attempt to keep a straight face.

It could be worse. Van Halen’s first studio album in nearly 15 years—and its first with Roth in almost three decades—could’ve sunk to the level of Sammy Hagar’s “supergroup” Chickenfoot. While the quartet, augmented by Eddie Van Halen’s son Wolfgang on bass, should’ve adhered to the concision exemplified by *Women and Children First* and *Fair Warning*, each featuring just nine tracks, there’s enough passable fare scattered amidst the 13 songs to prevent mockery and, there are no syrupy ballads. Still, in spite of a few inspirational bursts, the band seems out of ideas and generally, acts as a foil for Eddie’s pyrotechnic guitar stunts. The puffed-out-chest exuberance, top-of-the-world confidence, and raw force of its past are gone.

Yet drummer Alex Van Halen’s Venice Beach muscleman flex and gut-thumping toughness, Roth’s flashy exclamations and self-conscious camp, and Eddie’s high-wire fret acrobatics and whammy-bar-bending solos surface in places. When the devices are collectively put in the service of song, as on the catchy glam-pop “Tattoo,” carefree strut “Beats Workin’,” or prancing “She’s the Woman,” Van Halen distances its reputation as a hard-rock band that simply reformed

for another nostalgia-based cash grab. And it retains the sense to know from what early material it should liberally borrow. After a thudding introduction, “As Is” reveals itself as a doppelganger for “Hot For Teacher,” scurrying pace and finger-tapped licks included. The acoustic-into-electric blues signatures and Roth’s conversational yippety-yap jive on “Stay Frosty”? Yep, “Ice Cream Man” has returned, cold themes preserved. Roth even tries to reprise his trademark squeal on “Big River,” bolstered by old-fashioned give-and-take grist between the Van Halen brothers, even if his results are more *Asylum*-era Gene Simmons than vintage DLR.

In procuring “new” tunes, Van Halen allegedly pulled from demos and instrumental sketches recorded years ago. For better and worse, there seems to be some truth to the theory. The piecemeal construction of the paint-by-numbers “Blood and Fire” and one-dimensional “China Town” lack cohesiveness and suggest everything is built around pre-existing guitar lines rather than developed melody. *A Different Kind of Truth* often wants for more of the latter as well as the ample spaciousness and unforced attack present on Van Halen’s most aggressive classics. Insufficient, too, is

the knife-sharpness and spring-coiled crunch of Eddie’s tones, which, at their best, double as switchblades that balance Roth’s hand-wagging flair. And while the collective’s lyrics have seldom been much more than afterthoughts, cringe-worthy lines abound. Eddie’s Racer X-styled flurries, corkscrew turns, and zip-zah-zang arpeggios marginally save a number of plodding songs from imitation status.

But even a mostly reinvigorated virtuoso can’t rescue the messy “Honeybabysweetiedoll,” Hagar-esque “Outta Space,” or pile-driving “Bullethead” from the scrap heap. Hearing Eddie, sans accompaniment, dazzle on a few experimental instrumentals would be preferable to such fodder. At this juncture, the likelihood of the reclusive musician pushing himself to those limits seems remote. Above the dulled, synth-based fluff of later-era Van Hagar albeit absent the boisterous sleaze and hook-drenched swagger of the group’s heyday, *A Different Kind of Truth* constitutes a minor victory, however compromised.

—**Bob Gendron**



# FIONA APPLE

**Arlene Schnitzer Theater**  
Portland, Oregon

By Jeff Dorgay  
Photo by Amanda Hatfield

Fiona Apple's packed show at Portland's Schnitzer Theater got off to an auspicious start. The waif-like singer stormed the stage as if she were a lightning bolt striking the microphone stand, then profusely apologized for her tardiness. "I just got my fucking period and there was a mad search for tampons, so I'm sorry for the delay." No shrinking violet, she. The revelation made the opening "As Fast as You Can" even more appropriate.

Fresh from releasing her first new album in nearly seven years, Apple did not visit any of the recent material until she—and her quirks—had warmed up. Curling up like a ball on the stage at one moment, then racing out triumphantly towards the audience the next, her animated movements suggested a brilliant albeit unpredictable inner madness. Her voice in top form, Apple offered machine gun-like deliveries with barely a pause between the softest lyrics. Her most forceful screams of the evening arrived on "Tymp (The Sick in the Head Song)," summoning up her deepest-seeded ire and using the monthly hormonal rage to distinct advantage.

Exquisite as Apple's vocals were, her band's prowess—and its ability to keep up with the intense frontwoman's every move—put the concert over the top. While many songs featured slightly different arrangements in comparison to the studio versions, they retained the textural complexity that's long been a hallmark of Apple's work. Adding color and moodiness, guitarist Blake Mills frequently moved from producing dense fogs of Hendrix-like feedback to subtle, faint fretwork seconds later.

Akin to Prince, Apple took a fearless approach to her compositions, mixing and matching at will. Her work on the grand piano proved as deftly varied as her singing. She plunked away like a kindergartner discovering the instrument for the first time and spun discordant riffs reminiscent of King Crimson, all the while falling in and out of a trance-like state.

Much too soon, Apple wailed through "Not About Love" and, after a few false stops, the stage went dark. When the lights came up, Apple laughed and said, "I guess I better do an encore," ending the evening with a cover of Conway Twitty's "It's Only Make Believe." It represented one of the only instances of fantasy at an otherwise incredibly tangible show.



### Justin Townes Earle

*Nothing's Gonna Change the Way You Feel About Me Now*  
Bloodshot, CD or 180g LP



“Hear my father’s voice on the radio/Singing, ‘Take me home again,’” warbles Justin Townes Earle one second into his new *Nothing’s Gonna Change the Way You Feel About Me Now*. He invokes Steve Earle once again on the closing “Movin’ On,” but only by way of conversation with his mother. Fittingly, the reference is quickly swept under the rug.

As it should be, for on his fourth and finest album, the younger Earle completely puts his patriarch in the rear-view mirror, accomplishing the difficult feat with such convincing authority that any comparisons from here on out are nothing but lazy and trivial. It doesn’t hurt that the stripped-down, Memphis soul-ridden set eclipses anything dad’s made in more than a decade.

Weighing in at barely over a half hour in length, the 10-song set exists as an archetype of concision and economy. There’s not a wasted note, not one tossed-off idea or space filler. Earle doesn’t over-think or -analyze any moves. The casual

attitude extends to his decision to cut the album entirely live, sans overdubs, in just four days at a North Carolina studio that was converted from church. Earle’s succinct songwriting, pleasant band, and fluent sonics beget a creative trifecta: *Nothing’s Gonna Change the Way You Feel About Me Now* exudes direct purity and conviction. The songs sound as if they could come from any era—whether via a 1950s jukebox tucked away in neighborhood bar in El Paso or through a modern working band’s amplifiers. Their messages are honest, simple, and sincere, their melodies as warm and assured as the embrace of a loved one’s hands wrapped around a partner’s waist, and their feeling comfortable, natural, weightless, charming, easy.

Demonstrative of the album’s title, a majority of material revolves around relationships, and largely, the adaptations one usually must make to hold on to them. Earle’s protagonists yearn to find more preferable circumstances and reflect upon self-improvement. Earle sings “I thought I’d be a better man” on the contemplative “Am I That Lonely Tonight?”; indicates he’s “learning to be a better man” on the jazz-stoked shuffle “Look the Other Way”; wonders “maybe if I were I better man” on the heel-kicking R&B dust-up “Baby’s Got a Bad Idea”; confesses he’s “looking for a change” on the bright midtempo waltz “Memphis In the Rain.”

Similarly, the namesake character in the achingly gorgeous

“Unfortunately, Anna” wants for geographical and emotional transition. Earle paints her as a small-town local at the end of her rope, his sympathetic voice allowing tension to mount yet refrain from anger, the desperate wishes taking the form of pleas and leading up to a point where the singer delivers a knockout one-liner that turns the situation upside-down and seizes upon reality as a confrontational wake-up call. “It’s you that’s got to change,” he matter-of-factly declares, the record’s theme again coming full circle. But change is never easy—a concept the record openly and regularly acknowledges. “I just can’t stand myself alone,” Earle divulges after he’s offered an opportunity for a getaway retreat on the bluesy juke “Movin’ On,” during which the bandleader realizes trying is key to any success.

Addressing desires, regrets, failures, compromises, and minor triumphs in disarmingly plainspoken fashion—and with equally relaxed and bare-bones musical support via rubber-necking stand-up bass lines, cooing organ passages, brushed percussive beats, purring string devices, delicate piano notes, and measured brass fills—*Nothing’s Gonna Change the Way You Feel About Me Now* is as resolutely human as an album can be. Staying patient, refusing to hurry, and taking the shapes of teardrops and ribbons, the music unfurls as a soulful and soul-affirming courtship dance none of us can afford to ignore. —**Bob Gendron**

## MUSIC

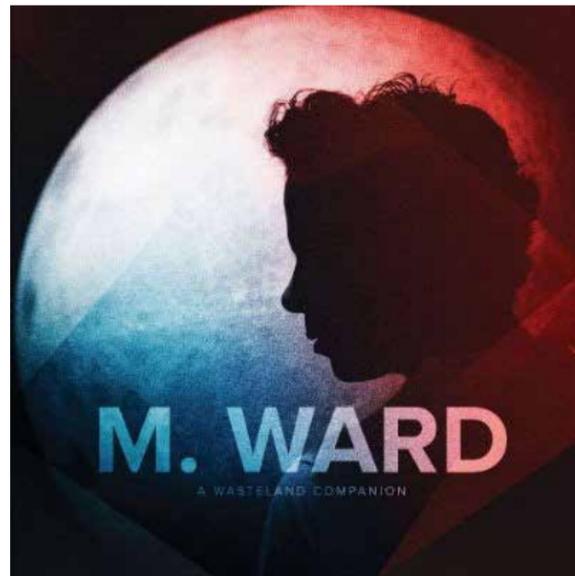
“

'd like to think I'm a primitive guy," sings Matt Ward early on in his latest solo turn. In many ways, the admission is a fitting description, as the singer's lush, distinctive songs often sound as though they're emanating from within the dusty grooves of 78RPM vinyl.

Indeed, even Ward's mannerisms seem borrowed from a more innocent time, and songs like "Sweetheart," which gets an assist from his She & Him companion Zoëy Deschanel, harken back to the 1950s, the frontman singing of taking drives down Lover's Lane and walking hand-in-hand beneath the stars. When his thoughts turn to the bedroom just one tune later on the rollicking "I Get Ideas," he refrains from using any words that might send even the most sensitive network censor into a tizzy, letting the listener's imagination fill in the gaps as he croons, "When we're dancing and you're dangerously close to me/I get ideas/Oh, I get ideas."

Elsewhere, Ward turns out cinematic tunes that come across like alternate soundtracks to a daydream ("Wild Goose," ) and more ominous turns best described as nightmarish (the galloping, primal "Watch the Show"). "Primitive Girl," which surges along on piano lines and slapdash drums that echo the song's title, lands somewhere in between, combining dreamy female backing singers with Ward's distorted, creepy vocals, which sound as though they echo from within an antique radio.

Ward has referred to *A Wasteland Companion*, recorded at various studios around the U.S. and Europe—including at John Parish's workspace beneath a centuries-old church in Bristol, England—as a musical travelogue of sorts, marking the years he spent on the road with She & Him and Monsters of Folk. Fittingly, the singer packs narratives with references to running away, conquering the ocean one wave at a time, and unfamiliar people who "look at

**M. Ward**

*A Wasteland Companion*  
Merge, CD or LP

you as if you were a stranger." This unsettled feel occasionally pours over into the music. "Me & My Shadow," for one, glides along innocently on a gentle strum of acoustic guitar before a fuzzed-out surf-rock riff rips through like a massive tidal wave, laying waste to everything in sight.

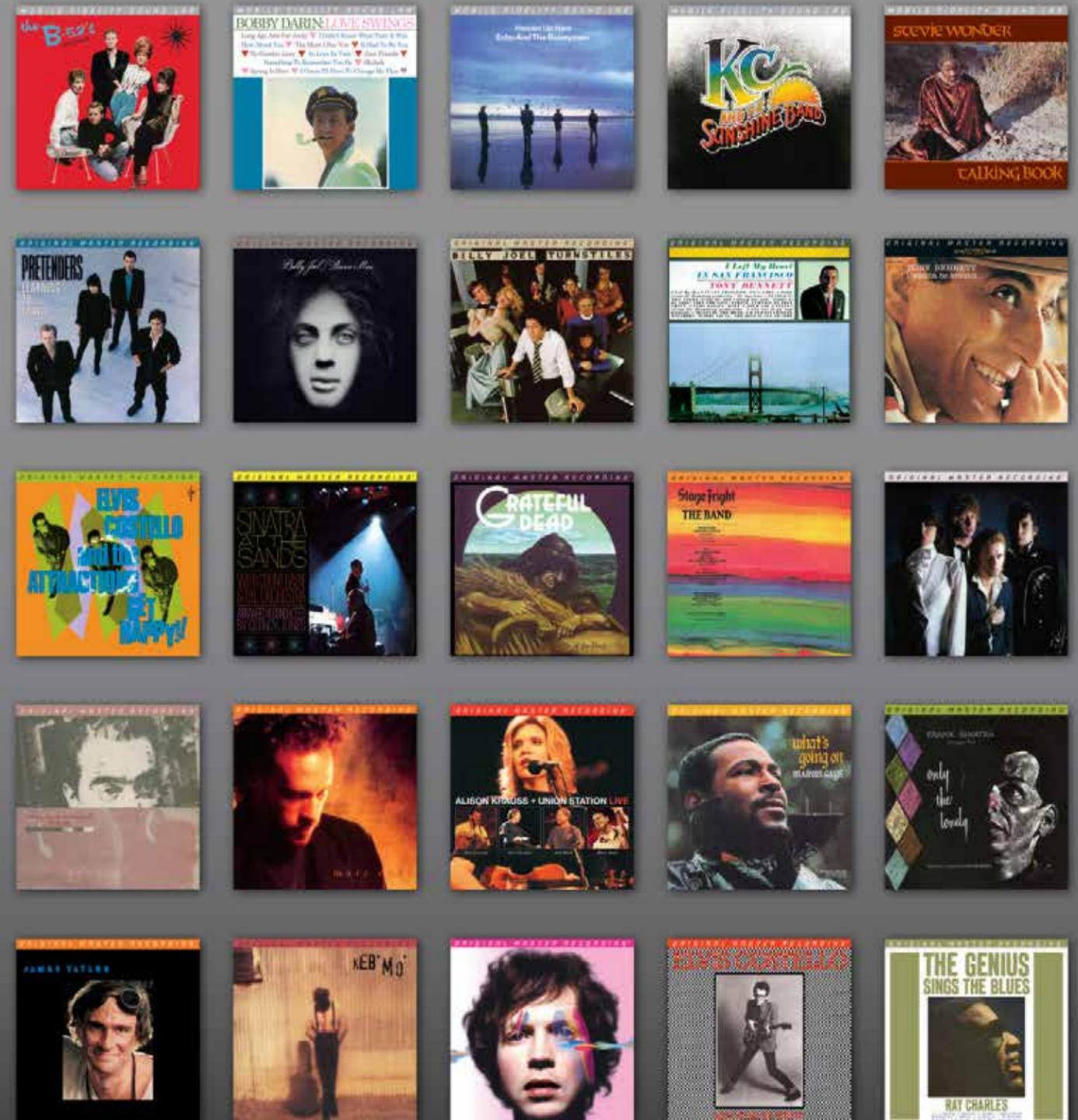
While Ward's strange surroundings certainly inform his approach, the album also seems to double as the singer's attempt to come to terms with the increased spotlight placed on him by both She & Him and Monsters of Folk. Lyrics that hint at deep-seeded self-doubt are scattered haphazardly throughout. "Some mistake me for a writer," he sings on one tune. Then, on another, "Mockingbird, you ain't no innovator." The album-closing "Pure Joy," an effortless acoustic number that drifts through like a pleasing spring breeze, further delves into this ongoing creative struggle. "Thought I was falling into a deep depression," he sings, "thinking all the mystery was gone." *A Wasteland Companion*, then, is the sound of Ward gradually rediscovering his muse. —**Andy Downing**

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# Giant Giant Sand

## Mississippi Studios

Portland, Oregon

By John Darko

Photos by Jeff Dorgay

*“That sounds like the first eight albums,”* Howe Gelb mumbles as the final notes of “Forever And Day” turn in on themselves under a pile of guitar squall. It’s true. Giant Sand used to sound more raucous, but this Portland appearance at Mississippi Studios is not the usual Giant Sand show.

Gelb has been around the block more times than most. Twenty-five years into Giant Sand’s career, he’s rotating lineups once again. In 2011, Gelb expanded both personnel and band name. Under the Giant Giant Sand moniker, tonight’s troupe are running us through *Tuscon: A Country Rock Opera*, Gelb’s most mainstream-shooting record since 2000’s *Chore Of Enchantment*. The album is more country than rock, at times sedate but nearly always enthralling. It plays out similarly when experienced live.



Running through a set that draws almost exclusively from *Tuscon*, the band isn’t playing oldies tonight. No opera can be sustained by a single voice. The Giant Giant Sand front man holds fast to stage right. Here, Gelb cuts a figure somewhere between Vincent Price and Leonard Nimoy. He’s a strange-looking fella with a voice that’s been aged in oak barrels.

A smattering of clever lyrical turns (“Where the band gets played by the song”) and double meanings murmured atop strummed guitar and brushed drums unfold on opener “Wind Blown Waltz,” and the crowd gets transported to the desert. Gelb’s voice is less whiskey and cigarettes, more bottomless well. Other story songs, like “Detailed,” are built upon a Mexicana-tinged boom-chicka-boom simplicity. Gelb’s songwriting so convincingly evokes the desert, you can almost feel the heat and dust of Arizona—no small feat when playing to a bunch predominantly Pacific Northwesterners.

After a strong start, one—then two—technical hiccups shove a stick into the spokes. Gelb breaks a string. He pauses to show us the guitar neck that he snapped in Spain and has been reaffixed with TiteBond. An anecdote about how the Spanish called it “Tittybond” breaks the awkwardness and buys the band time to recompose. Moments later, the battery in the guitar pedal that Gelb “won in the divorce” dies. A good time to switch things up.

Looking like a pair of mariachi-trained brothers that do Gelb’s dirty work behind the scenes, center-staged Brian Lopez and Gabriel Sullivan enjoy opportunities to take the horse by the reins and reclaim momentum. *(continued)*



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When they step up for lead vocal duties, they own the show. Stronger of voice and more strident than Gelb, Lopez and Sullivan ladle spoonfuls of Spanish soul. The stark contrast between the players proves far more interesting live than it is on record and, taken as a whole, the concert is the better for it.

Glitches behind him, Gelb leads the pack again. He drags a mic to his rear-facing piano (“I knew I shoulda put wing mirrors on this thing”) as Lonna Kelly steps out of the shadows to sing lead on a couple of lounge shuffles, one an age-old tale of loving and losing. Both on record and onstage, Kelley is like a Diana Krall that hasn’t been run ragged by audiophile clichés.

The show’s final few numbers fumble the ball more times than not, which is perhaps (Giant) Giant Sand’s shtick. Deciding whether it’s deliberate or accidental is anyone’s guess, and is more gentle collapse than explosive farewell.

Despite the meandering, sometimes-aimless performance, it never falls short on humanity and conviction. Occasional spurts of intensity burn brightest. *The Country Rock Opera* concept is easy to dismiss on paper, and might sound contrived on record, but the tenderness that stems from a variety of lead performers infuses the live show with soul. Like an old jalopy, it chugs along nicely, until eventually spluttering to a halt. ●

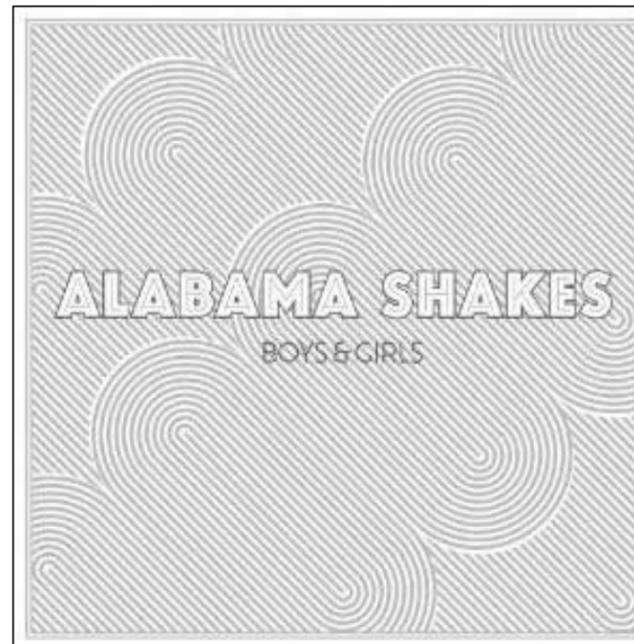




© Photo by David A. Smith

**First and foremost, the Alabama Shakes are a rock 'n' roll band, one with a lead singer who is equally comfortable to holler and stomp or simply let her voice crack as she tries to connect with a loved one.**

**A**mong the many assets of the Alabama Shakes is to leave the listener wanting more. At 11 songs and 36 minutes, the Northern Alabama group's debut album *Boys & Girls* isn't exactly a svelte little rhythm & blues morsel. But its songs, only two of which breach the four-minute barrier, are designed for the sneak attack.



### **Alabama Shakes**

*Boys & Girls*  
ATO Records, CD or LP

Keyboards grow sweltering hot, rhythms deliver a groove as if they're conveying an order, and singer Brittany Howard—oh my, Brittany Howard—throws one vocal knockout punch after another. She's steeped in all sorts of blues and soul tradition, yet the real templates here are the likes of Mick Jagger and Jack White.

Indeed, Alabama Shakes' penchant for rootsy instrumentation and songs that build to audience-participatory hallelujah moments has some pegging the group as a form of retro or vintage soul act. Such a description isn't inaccurate. Listening to "I Found You" is like blowing the dust off of some long undiscovered Motown gem, and "You Ain't Alone" is a prom-theme

slow-dance that channels an era when rock n' roll power chords were discovering the blues.

The tunes on *Boys & Girls*, however, aren't trying to freshen up tradition. Instead, they're trying to fight out of it. These songs feel as if they belong in a marathon four- or five-hour set loaded with blues and rock staples such as "Roadrunner" and "Everybody Needs Somebody to Love." These are bar-band tough and road-tested versatile, marked by the effortless swing from the tearjerker of a title track to the gospel preaching of "Be Mine." They're offered as deft little challenges: You think you know all there is to know about rhythm and blues? Think again.

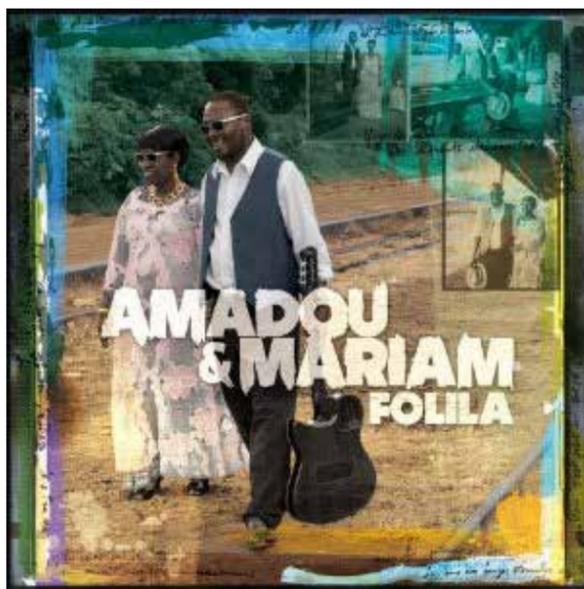
First and foremost, the Alabama Shakes are a rock 'n' roll band, one with a lead singer who is equally comfortable to holler and stomp or simply let her voice crack as she tries to connect with a loved one. As for where they will go from here, *Boys & Girls* throws the doors open wide as it all comes to a close. "Be Mine" swells to a grand finale of hoarse vocals and galloping guitars and keys, "I Ain't the Same" showcases the strength of the riff, and "On Your Way" sees Howard ending the album with a tease.

"It was just me, just little ol' me," she sings, and then gets out of the way to let her band kick up a racket. She's a force, yes, but the Shakes have plenty of other tricks in their arsenal. —**Todd Martens**

# F

rom the time they began playing, Amadou and Mariam, the adorable blind couple from Mali, waited more than two decades to experience a breakthrough in the United States. This despite having garnered a following in Europe and their native Africa much sooner. But later is better than never. Both 2005's *Dimanche a Bamako* and 2009's *Welcome to Mali*, co-produced by Blur's Damon Albarn, remain delightfully cosmopolitan affairs that fully embrace the "world music" moniker.

Albarn isn't involved with *Foila*. His absence may relate to the set's overall problem wherein promising material is victimized by an overabundance of guests and one of the oddest mixing decisions in memory. Originally, the duo set out to make two LPs. The first was conceived as a crossover effort shaped in New York City. The other, a traditionally minded affair captured in Bamako with African colleagues and vintage percussion. Everything went to plan, with the husband-and-wife team laying down the same songs in both locations, albeit with different personnel and arrangements. However, upon further contemplation, the pair elected to fuse the distinct outcomes via the aid of various mixing engineers.



### Amadou & Mariam

*Folila*

Nonesuch, CD or 2LP

While it's hard to fault ambition, *Folila* isn't the intended-for best-of-both worlds as much as an obvious amalgamation in which organic and electronic, retro and modern devices often sound artificial—or worse, blatantly commercialized. Rather than seamlessly intersect and mesh, tracks fit akin to misshapen puzzle pieces that line up only after they are forced together. The slightly cluttered, overly polished process is a step back from the true synthesis of the futuristic samples, hip-hop rhythms, and Westernized rock grooves dotting the collective's two previous efforts.

And it's not like Amadou and Mariam lack for compelling details or addictive fare found amidst the post-edit constructions. A desert-blues guitar line traces the melodic edges of the opening "Dougou Badia," one of the few times the musical guest (Santigold) doesn't overstay their welcome. An upbeat, sunny tropicalia vibe forces "C'est Pas Facile Pour Les Aigles" to dance, yet *Ebony Bones'* layered-on English-language vocals come across as unnecessary and distracting.

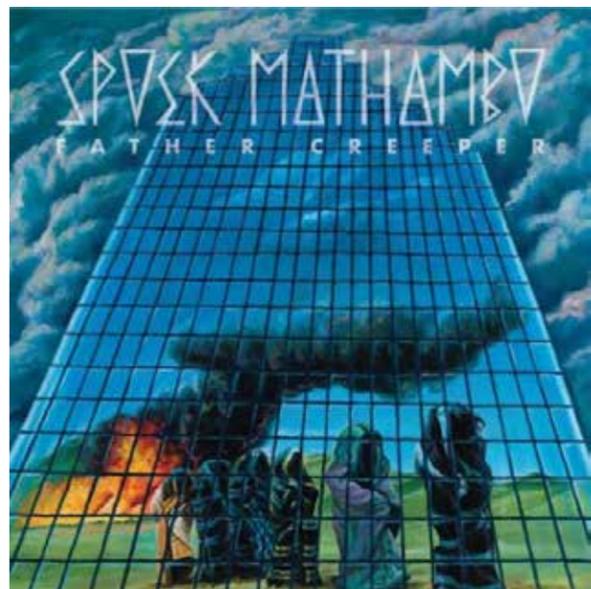


© Photo by Yuri Lenquette

"Metemya" begins well enough, its dusty roots planted in ancient soil. But when Scissor Sisters member Jake Shears enters, he turns it into a glossy pop tune that wouldn't be out of place in *Lion King*. Apart from being marketable names, TV on the Radio cohorts Tunde Adebimpe and Kyp Malone contribute nothing more of lasting value to the slender funk "Wily Katsaso" then they do on Tinariwen's recent *Tassili*.

Yeah Yeah Yeahs guitarist Nick Zinner and French singer/guitarist/harmonica player Bertrand Cantat are the two prominently billed helpers that add rather than subtract or simply just exist. Zinner drops flavor-filled riffs throughout, and the latter's *français* yields a genuine match with the horn-driven "Africa Mon Afrique" and rustic trance "Mogo."

Ironically, however, the headliners require little help; their blended voices and textured songwriting go down fine on their own. Someone needs to locate and individually issue the separate sessions, particularly the traditional African recordings. Exchanging purity, grit, and vibrancy for fabricated composites and pop-skewed catchiness on *Folila* does not make for a wise trade. —**Bob Gendron**



**Spook Mathambo**  
*Father Creeper*  
 Sub Pop, CD or LP

“**B**ad news is good for business,” spits South African rapper/singer/DJ Spook Mathambo, who was born Nthato Mokgata, on “Let Them Talk.” Judging by the 11 diverse cuts populating Mathambo’s sophomore album, *Father Creeper*, business must be booming.

“Put Some Red On It,” for one, plays like a counterpoint to Beyoncé’s “Single Ladies (Put a Ring On It),” seeing as it documents the violence and bloody human toll of the gold and diamond trades. Atop a sparse, gilded beat that could pass for a Neptunes production, Mathambo spins fevered hallucinations of kicking it with warlords in Sierra Leone, snorting gun powder, and the gaping wounds inflicted on those who step out of line.

Elsewhere, Mathambo sings of bullets falling like raindrops from the sky (the minimalist, creepy “Dog to Bone”), bemoans the calloused lives of blue-collar workers forced to work until they drop (the buzzing, synth-driven “We Can Work), and turns out cryptic tunes that read like shattered prayers (“I hope I don’t die ‘fore I get old,” he chants on the frenetic “Venison Fingers”). On “Stuck Together,” a guitar-driven jam that makes it clear grunge has finally made its way to Johannesburg, Mathambo repeats what might be the least sexy come-on ever recorded, singing, “We’ll have our tombstones rub up against one another.”

Musically, much of *Father Creeper* sounds somehow both handmade and futuristic—like a rocket ship constructed from spare parts in the garage of a backyard scientist. Throughout, Mathambo crafts a veritable mosaic of found sounds, piling on 8-bit videogame bleeps and beeps, jagged shards of synth noise, throbbing dubstep basslines, oceanic power chords, and terse Soweto guitar lines. “Let Them Talk” opens as a spiky R&B jam and closes in a torrent of spacey guitars that imagines what it might have sounded like had Explosions in the Sky been reared in South Africa rather than Texas. Other cuts are far uneasier. Mathambo assembles the title track from so many skittish moving parts that you almost sense it would dart away if someone reached out to touch it.

Indeed, the ever-restless Mathambo only finds a measure of peace on the album-closing one-two punch of “Grave (Intro)” and “Grave,” his voice drifting in as if he’s delivering his words from somewhere in the afterlife. Arriving on the heels of the chaos preceding it, the suggestion is clear: For many, peace comes only in death. For the rest of us, Mathambo constructs the dark, intensely weird soundtrack to our increasingly unsteady times. Best buckle up. —**Andy Downing**

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## MUSIC



### High On Fire

*De Vermis Mysteriis*  
E One Music, CD or LP

**H**igh On Fire picks up where Mastodon left off. Where the latter eschews fantasy worlds on its recent *The Hunter*, the formidable West Coast power trio embraces such concepts on *De Vermis Mysteriis*, which translates to “The Mysteries of the Worm” and honors the fiction of late novelist Robert Bloch. Song narratives involve a time-traveling twin brother of Jesus, an ancient Chinese scroll devised by an alchemist that invents a serum named Liao out of a black lotus, and the twin appearing in other individuals’ bodies. Got it?

Of course, storytelling has always taken a backseat to Matt Pike and Co.’s mountain-moving fare. With *High on Fire*, the riff takes priority, plundering bottom-end rhythms come in a close second, and everything else follows. While unquestionably the deepest-reaching psychedelic effort in the group’s six-album catalog, *De Vermis Mysteriis* doesn’t significantly alter the threesome’s approach. And there are not many reasons it should.

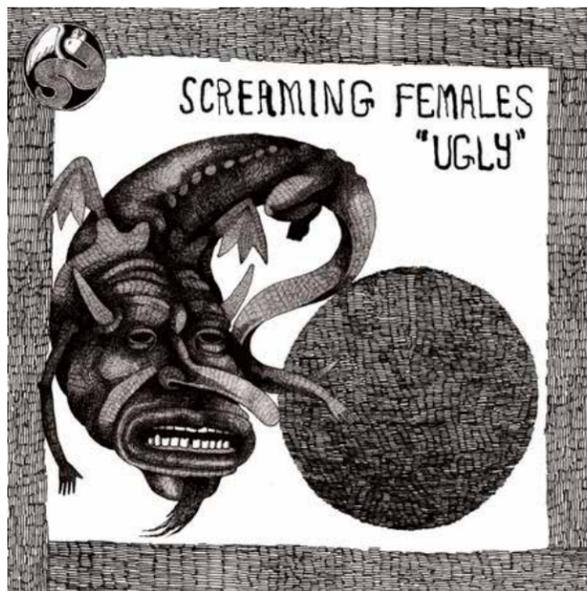
Long recognized by heavy-music aficionados as a mammoth guitarist, whether with his current outfit or during his tenure in pre-reunion Sleep, Pike lives and breathes metal—relishing its physicality, power, pace, and attack. Conscientious of the irony surrounding the mainstream press’ hyperbolic praise that’s greeted his band during the past few years, he’s likely getting a laugh from reading comments that lazily (and wrongly) label High on Fire “stoner metal,” drop vacuous drug references, and/or strike faux outlaw poses in attempts to feign shared interest in the bandleader’s outsider persona.

True to the demon-skull rings hugging his fingers and devilish tattoos decorating his hands and chest, Pike wields his pillaging six-string instrument akin to a battle axe on roto-tilling tunes such as “Madness of an Architect” and the title track without a trace

of self-consciousness or inauthenticity. Thrashing (“Fertile Green”), grinding (“Spiritual Rights”), and pounding (“Serums of Liao”), *High on Fire* is the sound of the underground—not in the cultural sense—but literally, meaning, the band projects what the earth’s outer core, boiling with iron-nickel alloy, sounds like as viscous fluids and rocks perform a constant dance of collision and tension. Framed by Des Kense’s aggressive double-kick drumming and Jeff Matz’s flexible bass lines, Pike’s hoarse, throat-straining growls and barks couldn’t demand a more fittingly dense, swinging, and scraping background.

Despite the familiar no-quit nature of a majority of the material, several changeups substantiate *High on Fire*’s ongoing evolution, however slight. Pike taps into an effects-laden solo on “Serums of Liao” that wouldn’t be out of place on an early Van Halen record had Eddie an extreme interest in punk and distortion. The instrumental “Samsara” seemingly doubles as a tribute to fallen Metallica bassist Cliff Burton and his memorable contributions to *Ride the Lightning*. “King of Days” slows down the tempo and recalls Pike’s early works.

Deviations aside, *De Vermis Mysteriis* is blood sport. While not entirely on par with the band’s last three superior records, it’s a witching hour that haunts, shakes, and crushes in the manner that anything connected to Pike should. —**Bob Gendron**



### Screaming Females

*Ugly*

Don Giovanni Records, CD or LP

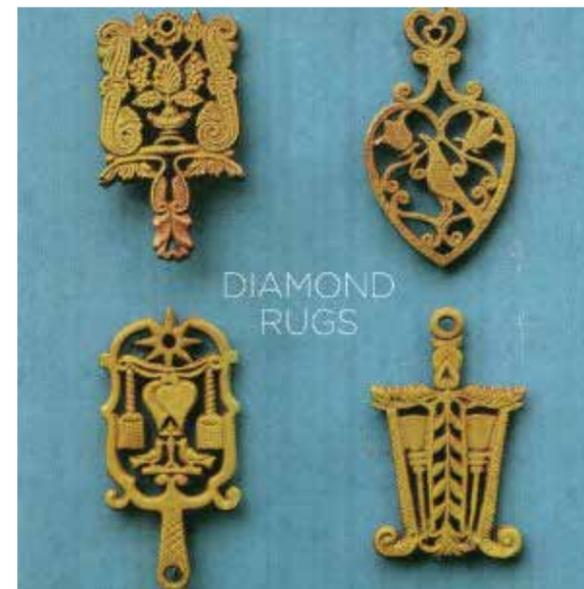
**E**arlier this year, a rock-obsessed friend of mine was lamenting a lack of modern-day guitar heroes. This is a man who, this past March, went to see the latest incarnation of Guns N' Roses multiple times in Los Angeles. To his credit, he found it depressing. Yet the bloated spectacle that is the modern-day Axl Rose simply made said friend more disheartened he had no current, crank-it-to-11 rock gods. He asked me for advice. Marissa Paternoster was the first name I told him to investigate.

So the name doesn't roll off the tongue, but Paternoster, the leader and heart of New Jersey trio the Screaming Females, has the ability to stop a listener dead in his or her tracks. Her band's new album, *Ugly*, is a lesson in six-string dexterity—so much so that absorbing all of its 14 tracks in one setting can be exhausting.

Nominally a punk band, Screaming Females pull from the genre's lean velocity but heighten the tension by threatening each song's tautness with fanciful guitar work. In "It All Means Nothing," Paternoster nearly brings the tune to a halt, using the instrument to slam the breaks one second and hit the accelerator the next. On "Red Hand," she doesn't riff so much as jump from Point A to Point C, her instrument wire-thin and spastic, recalling the work of Sleater-Kinney's Carrie Brownstein. Throughout the record, she wields her voice as if it's an animal fighting to be let loose of its leash, pulling her register down low, up high, or left and right with great recklessness.

While the band, on album No. 5, is only becoming more confident, *Ugly* is a coming-of-age record on which the act doesn't always like the look of maturity. "You want to make me older, but I can't grow again" Paternoster snarls during "Help Me," and then proceeds to unleash some of the most gleefully playful guitar work on the set. The closing "It's Nice" is the sole moment of calmness, complete with violins, in which the only wish against growing responsibilities and increasingly bad news is to "feel just like a little child." A guitar, after all, can only solve so much.

—**Todd Martens**



### Diamond Rugs

*Diamond Rugs*

Partisan, CD or LP

**W**hen he's not bellied-up to a bar, Deer Tick frontman John McCauley seems to enjoy plenty of spare time. The singer also dabbles in Middle Brother with folks from Delta Spirit and Dawes. And now, he's taken his liquor-clogged pipes to Diamond Rugs, an indie "supergroup" of sorts that counts members of the Black Lips, Los Lobos, Dead Confederate, and Six Finger Satellite among its ranks—as well as a few honored guests.

Deliberately shabby and sonically low-rent, the collective's self-titled debut comes across as the musical equivalent of checking into a budget motel for a night with a few buddies, several cheap six-packs, a bag of tacos, and nothing on the agenda but boozing and watching 1970s television reruns. *Diamond Rugs* is

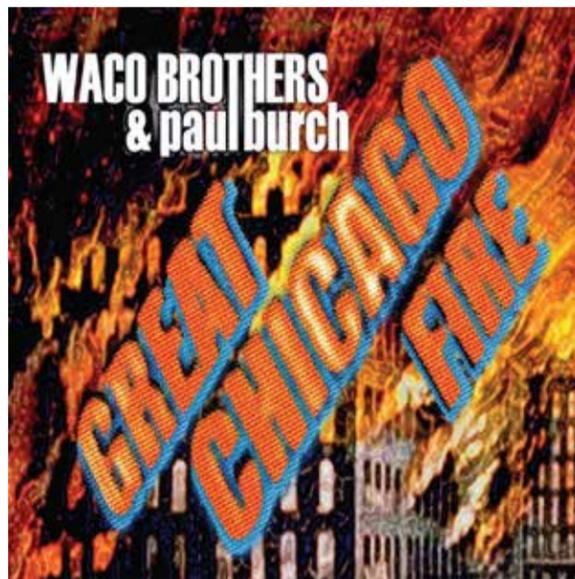
the type of scruffy, laissez-faire, low-key, do-it-yourself record Sub Pop would've proudly released and Jack Endino produced in the late 1980s.

In addition to clearly having fun in the Nashville studio, the cohorts extrapolate their enthusiasm to a batch of originals that toy with the idea of playfully sending up classic styles while simultaneously holding tight to a punk-rooted earnestness. Diamond Rugs cut both ways—songs are equally ironic and genuine, or, at least candid in the manner that a wobbly drunk is forthcoming to a gaggle of friends when it's well-past midnight and he can't stop himself from rambling on about relationships that got away, chance meetings, simple boasts, and wanting another can of Budweiser.

Fittingly, women, sexual yearning, rejection, country living, hangovers—and wishes for delights such as "the kind of dog/that listens when I call/and pisses on my neighbor's fence" on the humorous Westernized romp "Gimme A Beer"—are as deep as Diamond Rugs get on tunes that double as informal rap sessions. McCauley's ramshackle, frayed, occasionally out-of-tune, sung-spoken vocals resonate as those of a man who knows he's passed his limit but orders yet another whiskey and grabs one more smoke even if he realizes the consequences of such actions won't be kind. On the surf-tinged "Out on My Own," his throaty pleas and lying admissions evoke the *Blues Brothers* image of John Belushi, face dirtied, on his knees in front of Carrie Fisher, who buys his pathetic act.

Savvy musical references to and updates of the past also abound. "Country Mile" alternates between daydream-believer pop and heavy 1970s rock, wet-sock bottom-end textures included. "Call Girl Blues" sasses and struts, the horn section seemingly on loan from Neil Young's defunct Bluenotes era and taking up residence at a local Holiday Inn lounge. The self-lacerating "Totally Lonely" winks at classic Roy Orbison ballads, the sparse arrangement inviting blowing tumbleweeds and added vocal reverb. Keyboard accents join bluesy harmonica and strolling beats on "Motherland," invoking the fringe of mainstream 80s synthpop.

Yet, for all their humor, intentional and otherwise, Diamond Rugs have in the solitary lament "Christmas In A Chinese Restaurant" crafted a new holiday classic in which loneliness is no joke. Tom Waits, for one, would be proud. —**Bob Gendron**



### Waco Brothers and Paul Burch

*The Great Chicago Fire*  
Bloodshot, CD

**T**he opening line on the Waco Brothers first album since 2005's *Freedom and Weep* echoes Johnny Rotten's onstage epitaph for the Sex Pistols: "Did you ever get the feeling that you've been cheated?"

But while the Pistols were in the midst of a sloppy breakup, the Chicago-based Wacos, who've been kicking up a storm since releasing their 1995 debut, *To the Last Dead Cowboy*, still exhibit the easy camaraderie of lifelong friends. Anchored as always by songwriters Jon Langford, Tracey Dear, and Deano Schlabowski—and buoyed here by the addition of Nashville-based honky-tonker Paul Burch—the Brothers comfortably settle into middle-age life on the beautifully weathered *The Great Chicago Fire*.

That's not to say the roots-rockers can't throw down from time to time. Witness the title track, which imagines what T-Rex might have sounded like had Marc Bolan grown up

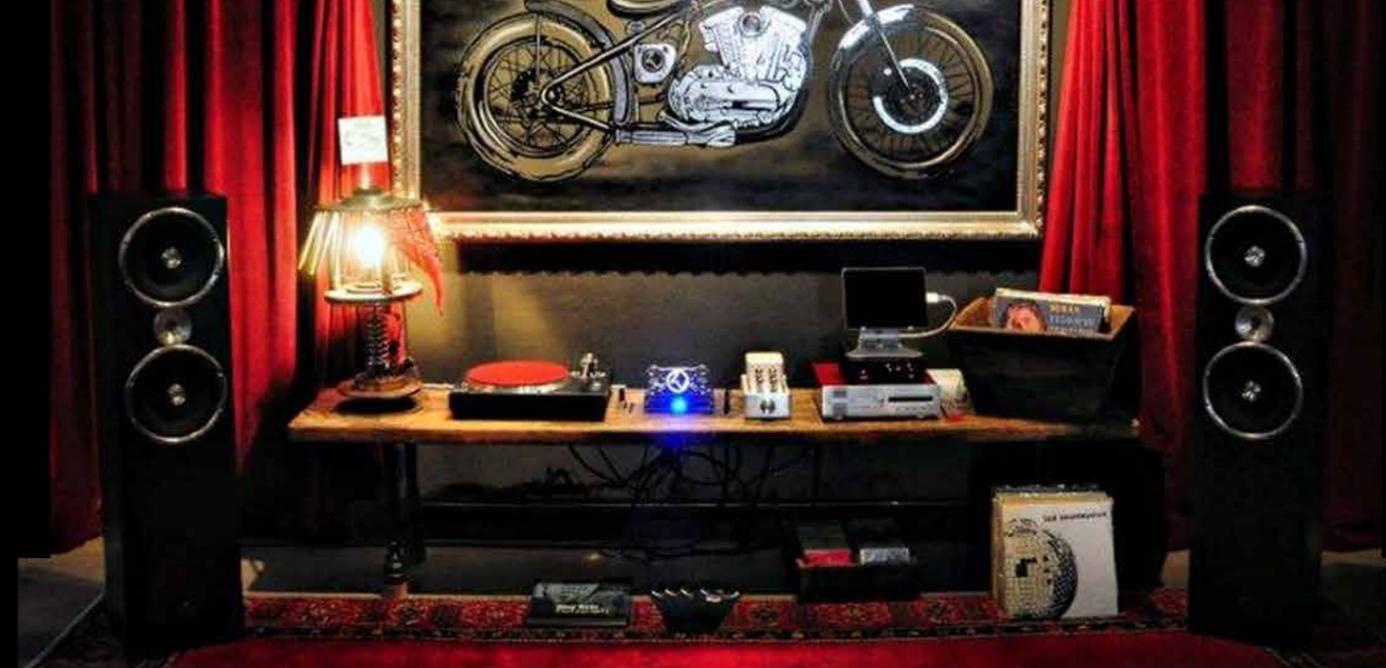
favoring dive bars and cheap beer rather than feather boas and top hats. Then there's a rowdy cover of Bob Dylan's protest anthem "A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall" that sounds as if it was thrown together at last call, steadily devolving into a tangle of jangly guitars and righteously angry, slurred voices.

Elsewhere, the politics remain largely personal, the bandmates turning out lived-in tunes about men existing on the fringes—be it in a relationship or within society as a whole. The casual, country-spiked "Monterey" comes across like a breakup anthem penned by Paul Giamatti's character in "Sideways," the mates singing, "You've got one bottle of wine to make up your mind." Conversely, the central figure in "Someone That You Know," which lopes along as steadily as Johnny Cash's "Folsom Prison Blues," sounds as if he could've sprung forth from the shadowy mind of author Cormac McCarthy, with his "teeth a little yellow" and "heart a little black."

There's little optimism throughout. Langford sings of how "everything that flies will someday fall" on the shuffling "Cannonball" and Burch opines that "no one ever dies with a smile on their face" on the casual pub rocker "Wrong Side of Love." Schlabowski's tejano-influenced "On the Sly" nearly serves as a counterpoint to the latter. "If I could make it through to see tomorrow," the guitarist sings atop a bramble of fingerpicked guitar notes, "If I could make it to the other side."

Still, while the band might sing of escape now and again—from the leaving-on-a-jet-plane ruminations of "Flight to Spain" to "Up on the Mountain," a fiddle-flecked hootenanny about taking in the view from a distance—the spirited music indicates that there's never any doubting the Wacos are in it for the long haul. —**Andy Downing**

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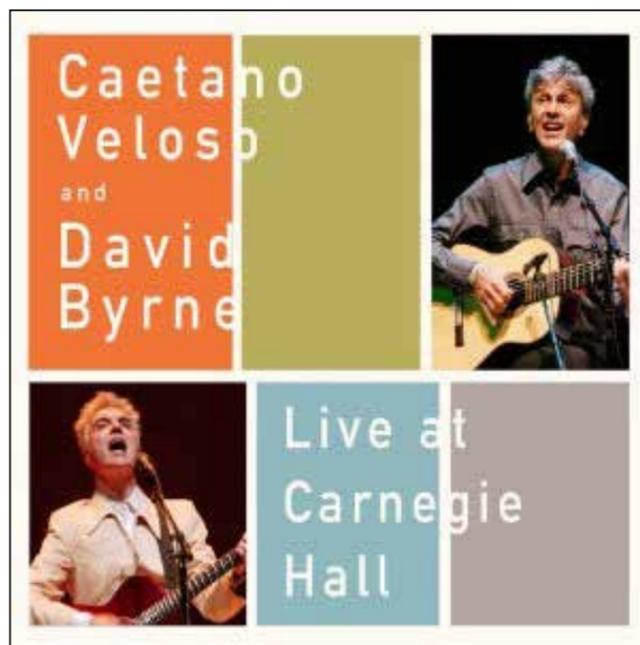
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### Caetano Veloso and David Byrne

*Live at Carnegie Hall*  
Nonesuch, CD



© Photo by Chris Lee

**W**hat a lovely time this concert was. Exquisite, even.

The moment Caetano Veloso's "Desde Que o Samba é Samba" opens this live album, it's easy to picture the attentive Carnegie Hall audience relaxing with a smile, marveling at how Veloso's hands seem to tap-dance over his strings. The melody isn't played so much as brushed, materializing as if one is watching a time-lapse of a watercolor painting. Even more sprightly moments, such as the Talking Heads' "And She Was" and David Byrne's "Everyone's in Love with You," are preserved as if they're museum pieces—so pristinely captured that one gets the sense that the slightest mistake will send the whole thing crashing down.

Chances are, if you're reading this, you did not witness this 2004 concert, recorded as part of a Veloso-curated week of events at Carnegie Hall. Eight years later, Nonesuch is giving the event the live album treatment, and on record, the pairing of musical legends and longtime friends likely comes across more serious than it did in the flesh.

Byrne, a longtime admirer of the Brazilian singer/songwriter, arrives after a handful of Veloso originals, which find the latter accompanied by little more than cellist Jacques Morelenbaum.

The mood definitely changes. Joined by percussionist Mauro Refosco, Byrne's "She Only Sleeps" becomes a lovely bossa nova trifle, and the Talking Heads' "Life During Wartime" is reworked so that the acoustic guitars drive the rhythm. Later, Byrne's "God's Child" gives way in its final moments to a fiery, Latin beat—a feel sweetened on "Dreamworld: Marco de Canaveses."

*Live at Carnegie Hall* ultimately becomes a snapshot of two celebrated artists that appear to be in awe of

each other's songwriting and musicianship. The most inspired moments are those that feel most spontaneous, namely the vocal and language-swapping during Veloso's "Um Canto de Afoxé para o Bloco do Ilê" and the Talking Heads' "(Nothing but) Flowers." Byrne sings in Portuguese on the former, and Veloso sings in English on the latter. And even when both are clearly out of their comfort zone, they sound nothing less than calmly sophisticated. —

**Todd Martens**

**Civic Opera House**

Chicago, Illinois

By Bob Gendron

Photos by Jeff Dorgay

# Wilco

**A**s Mavis Staples and Nick Lowe joined in for a show-stealing rendition of The Band's "The Weight," Wilco closed the opening salvo of its five-night hometown stand in memorable fashion at a sold-out Civic Opera House. Leader Jeff Tweedy traded verses with the gospel legend and pub-rock icon, respectively, capping a 130-minute concert that, akin to its recent *The Whole Love*, witnessed the beloved sextet reconnect with its organic strengths and rebound from a previous stretch pockmarked with complacency.

While there's never been any doubting the chemistry and potential of Wilco's current lineup, now together longer than any previous incarnation, its studio showings have yet to produce a work on a level with 1999's *Summerteeth*, 2002's *Yankee Hotel Foxtrot*, or 2004's *a ghost is born*. Arriving in the wake of an ambitious and expertly executed Chicago residency during which it played every song in its catalog, the ensemble's 2009 tour left an empty feeling, with the group opting for safe comfort rather than bold risks. Tweedy, in particular, seemed to be succumbing to the mid-career creative block that inflicts most legacy artists. Not that constant outsider hype or unsolicited tie-ins (a sandwich, beer, and soda, among other products, named in the band's honor) helped.



Yet from the ten-minute-plus "One Sunday Morning (Song for Jane Smiley)," a hushed folk epic that spirited guitarist Nels Cline splintered with violet-hued textures, to the frenetic lightning-striking coda gracing a delightfully jagged "A Shot in the Arm," Wilco on this mild winter evening subscribed to a loosened-up nature receptive to surprises and detours. Glenn Kotche, still rock's best jazz drummer, tapped out Morse Codes of rhythmic voodoo with an array of percussive devices, blending colorful sounds with atmospheric electronic back-grounds on "Poor Places" and providing an elegant thump to the cheery vibes pervading "I Might."

Recognizable via his trademark tousled hair and scraggly beard, Tweedy toned down his onstage banter—not to the extent of ignoring the crowd or bypassing every opportunity to crack wise, but noticeably enough to focus on the music. He repeated the climactic "Nothing!" refrain in "Misunderstood" no less than 32 times, the self-aggrandizing song coming on like a nearby thunder-clap before the violence finally gave way to calm, similar to the way, after black clouds pass, forest activity rears back to life after a destructive storm. The singer's softer side emerged during the rootsy "Far, Far Away," augmented by Cline's purring lap-steel accents, an attenuated "War on War," and graceful "What Light," which threatened to float away into the ether. *(continued)*

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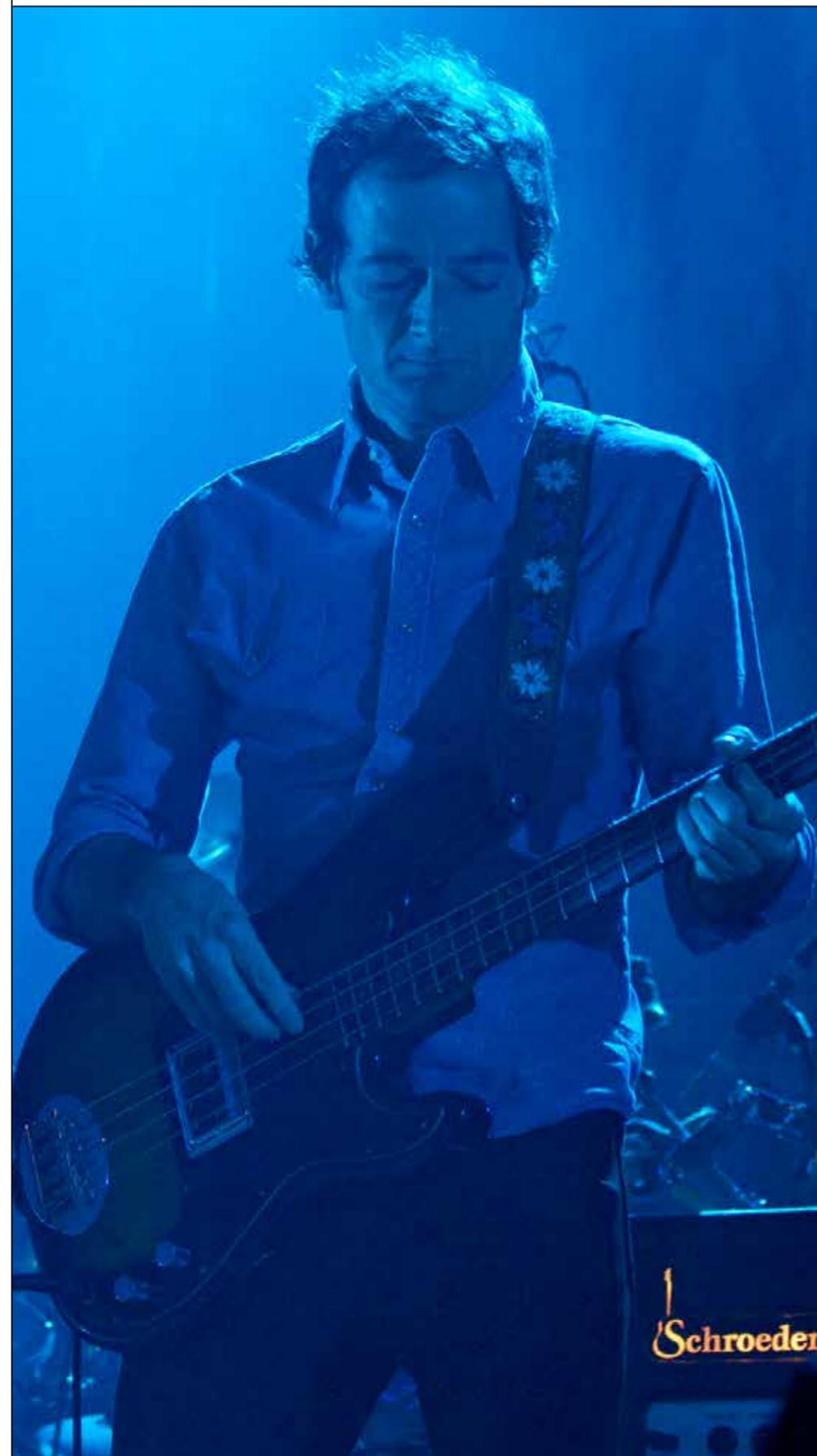
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## CONCERT



Each member's distinctive sonic skills extended to their physical traits, with the collective forming a potluck of cohesive personalities and specialties. Laidback keyboardist Mikael Jorgensen resembled an accountant; giddy multi-instrumentalist Pat Sansone passed as a Justin Bieber look-a-like; rock-steady bassist John Stirratt seemed a professor plucked straight out of an English lit class at nearby Columbia College; and the mesmerizing Cline filled the shoes of Gumby, an awkwardly towering presence whose lanky frame shivered and recoiled in reaction to the buzzing harmonic passages and noise-blanced solos he unfurled, occasionally wildly, as in communion with Tweedy throughout "I'm the Man Who Loves You," which the latter punctuated by scraping his guitar strings with the side of a metal license plate.

For all unhinged moments, a few turns dragged. The band severed "One Wing" just as it began to take flight. The acoustic "Rising Red Lung" and understated bop of "Capitol City" registered as filler, especially amidst superior newer material such as "The Art of Almost."

Still, with decorative white ornaments hanging overhead in a stately venue that's witnessed a lion's share of dramatic productions, Wilco triumphed without putting on cute airs or resorting to simple nostalgia. With Staples onboard urging everyone to put "the load on" her, it was the kind of night on which a drummer can stand on top of his kit in winking king-of-the-mountain fashion and a group can perform while fake snow falls—and still look (and sound) good doing it. ●



### Neil Young and Crazy Horse

*Americana*

Reprise, CD or 180g 2LP

**Young brilliantly borrows songs from the U.S.' historical fabric and tosses them as live grenades that explode on impact, broaching the staple concepts—freedom, liberty, justice, equality, rights, conflicts, privacy, the common good—on which America prides itself.**

Neil Young's electric guitar jabs, retreats, and then stabs again, frayed-wire distortion coating the clusters of notes, the intensity evoking images of a fire-eyed preacher determined to spur his congregation to sit up and take notice. There's talk of killing a big red rooster, proclaiming "hallelujah," and celebrating with a communal gathering. Young's longtime Crazy Horse mates stomp and clatter, giving the tune a unified drive that turns it into an Indian war dance, the refrains doubling as dead-man's curves as the insatiable momentum tumbles forward.

No, the children's song ordinarily known as "She'll Be Coming 'Round the Mountain"—named "Jesus' Chariot" here in tribute to its Negro spiritual and salvation-based origins—has never sounded quite like this. It's one of eleven folk songs Young and his inimitable backing band reinterpret and upend on the impossible-to-ignore *Americana*, a thematic album exuding immediate relevance and forceful contemplation.

Never shy about making bold political or civil statements, Young brilliantly borrows songs from the U.S.' historical fabric and tosses them as live grenades that explode on impact, broaching the staple concepts—freedom, liberty, justice, equality, rights, conflicts, privacy, the common good—on which America prides itself. He and Crazy Horse invoke these broad subjects without advocating one party or another; *Americana* owes some of its political and cultural potency to its impartiality.

Unlike previous albums (i.e., *Living With War*) on which Young's issued unequivocal statements, there's no jingoistic intent, no direct order, no heavy-handed suggestion to take a potentially alienating stance. Rather, *Americana* is unambiguous social commentary by way of clever intimation, traditional adaptation, and shared experience—tenets tied to folk music's definition and purpose, and to the familiar songs here transmitting myriad messages and challenges. Unlike other artists that chose to rail against current problems by releasing obvious and stern protest fare, Young and Co. assume a discreet approach, handpicking material ("Oh Susannah," "High Flyin' Bird," "Wayfarin' Stranger") that lacks loaded meaning.

These old murder ballads, folk tales, nursery rhymes, and drifter fables communicate between the lines. Their lyrical simplicity reveals issues of class warfare, worker compensation, rampant unemployment, labor conditions, responsibility, public ownership, burden and benefit, military combat, inclusiveness, and independence—matters that in today's deeply divided America are debated and questioned as fiercely as during any time in the past. Several selections, such as the raggedly glorious doo-wop garage-rock romp "Get a Job" and hayseed ramble

"Travel On," convey points via a frisky humor and carefree attitude that better disguise the topical matters. *Americana* doesn't pretend to have the answers, but it's in the thick of igniting a balanced, cordial, and crucial conversation, sparking dialogues about identity and direction.

While Young and Crazy Horse wisely evade stamping the arrangements and deliveries with stony-faced seriousness, usually opting for a loose, fluid playing style and raw, in-the-room vibe, weighty drama and impending death ripple through a wind-whipped "Clementine" (complete with an unexpected plot twist pulled from early versions) and crackling "Tom Dula," the latter clinging to a rhythm that droops just like the protagonist's head—once he's hung. The nearest sonic reference to the groove-reinforcing manner in which Young and Frank Sampedro's guitar chords roll akin to waves washing up on the shore, and to the alternating currents of barbed sharpness and crunchy feedback Young conjures from fills and solos, arrives via the same lineup's take on "Farmer John" from 1990's ageless *Ragged Glory*.

Save for the more polished send-up of "Gallows Pole," a similarly rich and country-rock-reared aural palette echoes here. Recorded on a Universal Audio tube console and to Studer two-inch eight-track

analog tape, thick chords and rough-and-ready riffs hang, wander, growl, gurgle, and toss around in the dirt; drum beats smack and slap like wet towels whapped against a cement wall. Everything, save for several well-placed choir vocal passages, is captured in the moment, fortifying *Americana* as the sound of a real, live band performing in a real space. After the collective's nine-year hiatus, the dynamic is refreshing and reinvigorating to experience once again, even if it's now been in commission for four-plus decades.

And yet Crazy Horse and Young's aural vigor all feels new, particularly given the record's urgency and bold extension of tradition, expounded by educational and explanatory liner notes that accompany each song. Young also penned a few words to explain the significance behind the artwork. No elucidation, however, is necessary to empower the music, or what's at stake on a white-lightning-soaked rendition of "This Land Is Your Land" and proudly marching "God Save the Queen." On the latter, the band merges the de facto British anthem with melodies and lyrics from "My Country 'Tis of Thee." It's genius pairing that, in this, the centennial year of folk giant Woody Guthrie's birth, sounds a call to let freedom ring, loudly.

—Bob Gendron

# Remembering Dick Clark

By Ben Fong-Torres



© Photo courtesy AP Wire Services

When Dick Clark died, I got several calls from media outlets seeking comments—or, more accurately, sound bites. And a magazine contacted me about writing about the man forever known as “America’s Youngest Teenager.”

But it wasn’t *Rolling Stone*, for which I interviewed Clark in 1973. It was *The Hollywood Reporter*. What used to be a trade magazine has been redesigned to reach a broader audience, with editors from *US Weekly* and, yes, *Rolling Stone*.

So I did an article, which you can see here:

<http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/dick-clark-death-ben-fong-torres-rolling-stone-memory-315826>

The magazine used, as its headline, a quote from a sometimes brutally candid Clark, who responded to my whining about capitalist exploiters of pop culture. I wasn’t referring to him, but he took it personally and said, “The problem with you is that you’re a liberal, and I’m a fucking whore.”

Clark, who was 43 when we met in his office in Hollywood and then his home in Malibu, was making no apologies for being who and what he was.

*The Hollywood Reporter* piece details how Clark’s business smarts helped him weather the Congressional payola hearings of the late 50s. The hearings caught numerous disc jockeys in their web and destroyed some careers. Said Clark: “I found a better way to do it. To be in the

music business.” He got into talent management and music publishing. He invested in record distributors and pressing plants. He bought, at a low stake, an interest in several record labels. And when they profited—sometimes with a little help from exposure of artists and songs on “Bandstand”—so did he. “I had done nothing illegal or immoral,” he said. “I had made a great deal of money and I was proud of it. I was a capitalist.”

In my article, I recall a wonderful night, a couple years later, with Clark, who hosted Dianne, my wife, and I in a cruise around Las Vegas. And it ends with an acknowledgment of his inadvertent role in my getting started at *Rolling Stone*, in spring of 1968. Here’s my conclusion:

*Rolling Stone* had been publishing for only a few months, and, along with my post-college roommates, who were involved in music and media, I was a fan. One day, one of the roomies, Abe Jacob, told me about an upcoming free concert at a nearby park, featuring the Siegal-Schwall blues band out of Chicago, to promote a new movie about the Haight-Ashbury, produced by Dick Clark. What? I thought. Dick Clark and hippies? (The movie was *Psych-Out*, with Jack Nicholson, a year before his breakout in *Easy Rider*, in the role of “Stoney.”) I called the magazine, then based in San Francisco, with the tip, and wound up with my first piece in *Rolling Stone*. Not a story, exactly, but an item for “Flashes,” the precursor to “Random Notes.”

But I was in, and, within a year, joined the editorial staff. And I have Dick Clark and his exploitative, capitalistic ways to thank.

I felt for him, reached out to him in 2004 after he’d suffered his stroke. I continued to tune in to see him on his New Year’s Rockin’ Eves. It’s been difficult the last few years, as he struggled with his speech. Many people wondered why he’d put himself out there like that, for the world to see. But he’d never shied from the spotlight. In fact, he craved it. It was his comfort zone. And, for many years, it was ours, too. ●

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**K**elly Hogan can be selfless to a fault.

Long celebrated in music circles for her vocal contributions to albums by the likes of Drive-By Truckers, Mavis Staples, and friend and musical compatriot and Neko Case, the singer has, at times, set aside her solo ambitions to benefit her assuredly grateful peers. With *I Like to Keep Myself in Pain*—her first full-length studio release since 2001's *Because It Feels Good*—Hogan appears to have called in every one of the countless favors she's amassed through the years. The vocalist's heavy-weight backing band includes Booker T. Jones and Dap-Kings bandleader Gabriel Roth, among others, and the album features songwriting contributions from a range of heavy hitters, including M. Ward, Robyn Hitchcock, Stephen Merritt, and Andrew Bird.

Despite the assembled star power, the longtime Chicagoan, who now makes her home in rural Wisconsin, remains the central figure, delivering a string of bruised ballads, bar-band soul scorchers, and country weepers that could comfortably exist in any era. Hogan excels at mining beauty from heartbreak, and the album's title track—an aching torch ballad steeped in coffee-rich organ—serves as a fitting rallying cry. “In the quiet night I sleep to the sweet cascade of rain/Then your voices come to haunt me/So I like to keep myself in pain,” she sings before unleashing a tortured howl that sounds something like a thousand hearts shattering at once.

Elsewhere, Hogan crawls inside the mind of Frank Sinatra *Being John Malkovich*-style on “Daddy’s Little Girl,” recounts hard life lessons learned on the diamond-tough “Ways of the World,” and turns “We Can’t Have Nice Things” into the saddest-ever version of MTV’s “Cribs,” showing off a home as battered as the relationship between the two that once shared the space. Despite the near-constant pileup of wreckage both emotional and physical, Hogan’s spirited presence prevents the album from turning into a total bummer. “Gaze into the ruins of your life,” she sings pointedly on the defiant “Haunted.” “Just don’t look down.”

Besides, the singer’s long-overdue return is cause enough for celebration. With a little luck, perhaps this time around she’ll even receive the mainstream acclaim that’s somehow managed to elude here all these years. Indeed, when Hogan sings, “I want to hear your voice coming out of my radio” on the sparkling “Golden,” it’s as though she’s giving voice to everyone that happened to catch her supporting her more famous friends or performing for too-small crowds at various dive bars in and around Chicago this last decade. Now, one would hope, it’s finally her time. —**Andy Downing**



### Kelly Hogan

*I Like to Keep Myself in Pain*  
 Anti, CD or LP

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**Best Coast**

*The Only Place*

Mexican Summer/Wichita, CD or LP

**B**ethany Cosentino is pushing her luck. If there was one thing her L.A. band's 2010 debut *Crazy for You* makes clear, it was that Cosentino's only obsession greater than her cat might've been the state she calls home. One is charming, and one is a pop music cliché.

Best Coast's new *The Only Place* begins straight away with California love. "Why would you live anywhere else?," she gallingly asks on the title track, a galloping little vintage rock ditty as tidy and bright as Disney's Main Street. Granted, she sings the line sweetly, and yes, she sounds genuinely curious, but there isn't exactly a drought on odes to L.A.'s sun, sand, and babes—the latter word being hers.

And yet, it works. The tune serves a greater purpose than simply correcting the wrongs of Katy Perry's "California Gurls." (Also, give Cosentino credit for alluding to the fact that Californians actually have jobs.) With her musical companion Bobb Bruno in tow, the opening track signals the album's intent of giving way to a batch of crisp, windows-down, three-minute pop nuggets. What's more, before too long, it turns out Cosentino's romanticized version of California is less about home-state cheerleading than manufacturing an escape.

This is an album about growing up inside your own head. "What a year this day has been," she sings on "Last Year," almost getting lost in the cascading guitars and starry-eyed harmonies. She's losing sleep over what her friends think of her success in "How They Want Me to Be," and she's hunching her shoulders and admitting mom was always right on "My Life." These are everyday issues, and the solutions are simple. "It's no fun when I'm freaking out," she proclaims on "Better Girl." But the little things sometimes have the most timeless appeal, and Cosentino's guitar is never less than upbeat.

Working on the record with producer Jon Brion (Kanye West, Fiona Apple), Best Coast trimmed a bit of its scruff. This is no longer the sound of music born in a garage, but music fit for sharing a shake at the soda fountain. The few ballads on *The Only Place* are showstoppers, largely because they take their time and always showcase Cosentino's Laurel Canyon tenderness. "Dreaming My Life Away" boasts a tropical tinge and "No One Like You" feels like a doo-wop classic, one built around a rhythm that pleads patience and a vocal that echoes loneliness.

The latter, in fact, offers the most evidence that Best Coast has matured. "If I sleep on the floor, will it make you love me more?" Cosentino sings on the opening line. It isn't until the second verse that it becomes evident that the song is not a love letter to a feline. —**Todd Martens**



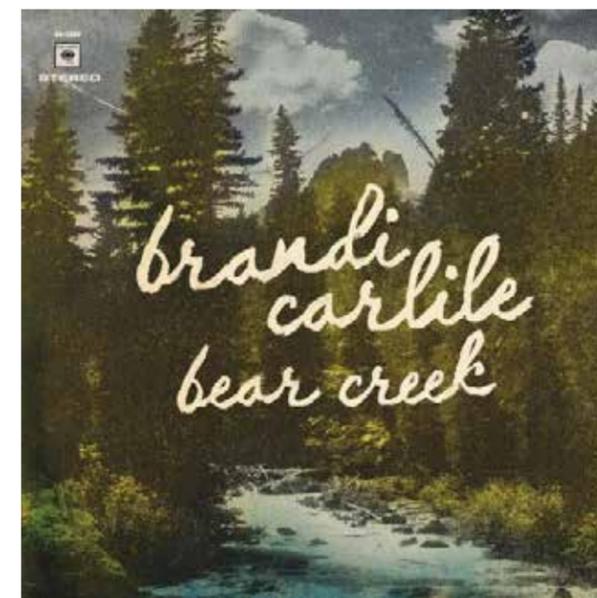
**W**hile she's not a comic-book hero Avenger, Brandi Carlile possesses a disarming, clear, clarion voice that could seemingly leap tall buildings in a single bound. Late last year, on her first-ever solo tour, the Seattle transplant wowed with volume-dealing pipes that expressed a broad range of emotions without resorting to petty histrionics, invoking maudlin devices, or coming across with the harshness that plague many pre-packaged pop contemporaries. Carlile's stage presence also mirrored the projective reach of her singing. She didn't draw attention to her sexuality or flaunt attitudinal clothing, and yet her independence was never in question.

Four studio albums into her career, Carlile now possesses enough top-flight songs to match that soaring voice. Lyrically, she latches onto relationship episodes involving longing, grieving, and regret, and still, invites enough lighthearted fare and happy-ending devotionals to complete a well-rounded whole. Given her hit-making potential—particularly at a time when Adele, with whom Carlile shares similar traits, dominates—it would seem that her new *Bear Creek* would prime her for a creative and commercial breakout.

While the album might see considerable sales success and doesn't lack for sporadic bursts of literate material, it's not the set Carlile needs. Well-manicured, with pronounced smoothness and rounded edges, the rootsy effort hems in the exuberance, grit, and spontaneity the Washington State native displays onstage. In addition to featuring an assortment of session instrumentalists, it again pairs her with longtime collaborators and bandmates Tim and Phil Hanseroth, who, aside from their songwriting contributions, weren't missed when Carlile went it alone. In the wake of T Bone Burnett and Rick Rubin, respectively, Grammy-winning Trina Shoemaker becomes the latest name engineer/producer unable to present Carlile in the proper studio light. One yearns to hear what she'd do with minimal accompaniment, or what she could muster if left alone with a piano and guitar. It'll have to wait.

Taking its name from the facility at which it was recorded, *Bear Creek* reflects a rustic bent, with mandolins and violins shadowing a majority of tracks. A streamlined, bluegrass-tinged blend of handclaps and gently stomping beats graces the opening "Hard Way Home" and "Raise Hell." Both songs demand mettle and defiance, and even as Carlile's pale country drawl and note-vaulting flutter demand attention, background vocalists and a pop sheen castrate their effect. Her timbre can't rescue the derivative "100" or "Hearts Content," either.

In spite of multiple stale, conservative arrangements—"Just Kids" is the sole take that plays with atmospherics and swaddles the music in adventurous, advantageous settings—Carlile's soulfulness and sincerity transcend a majority of the limitations. On the simple innocence of



### **Brandi Carlile**

*Bear Creek*  
Columbia, CD or 2LP

"Keep Your Heart Young," she rides washboard-like percussion and acoustic strumming back to her childhood days, relaying an old adage in a fresh, fun manner. Carlile flexes her sympathy-inducing falsetto and hiccupping lilt during "I'll Still Be There," which balances on a repeating piano riff and gives way to her big cry of a voice. With girl-next-door wholesomeness and predisposed ache, she excels at self-reflection, despair, and assurance, her singing patiently floating atop melodic flourishes until they crest, allowing her to cash in on dramatic crescendos. And she never requires much help.

For evidence, see "That Wasn't Me," a tender piano ballad that begins unaccompanied and finds Carlile tearing into words with a personal intensity and apologetic intimacy too often missing on the record's over-processed songs. Used sparingly, a gospel choir adds integrity and depth. But the head-turner is strictly Carlile's turn, as it should be. —**Bob Gendron**



### Neneh Cherry & the Thing

*The Cherry Thing*  
Smalltown Supersound, CD

**F**or the past two decades, Neneh Cherry has primarily served as an answer to 80s-minded trivia questions along the lines of “Who sang the hit ‘Buffalo Stance’?” The step-daughter of trumpet great Don Cherry seemingly disappeared after crafting two memorable off-beat dance-pop records during the George H. Bush era, and one subpar effort, *Man*, during Bill Clinton’s reign. She’s sporadically surfaced since, briefly appearing on albums from Pulp and Gorillaz, turns recognized only by ardent fans.

Given the insatiable quest for nostalgia, it’s not surprising to see Cherry return after missing in action for the past 15 years. What’s exciting, however, is the way she saunters back, within a setting that speaks to her punk roots and familial heritage. On *The Cherry Thing*, the Stockholm native pairs with free-jazz trio The Thing, a formidable ensemble comprised of saxophonist Mats Gustafsson, bassist Ingebrigt Haker Flaten, and drummer Paal Nilssen-Love. These are not mellow petal-pushers.

Members of the trio count Ken Vandermark, Atomic, and Thurston Moore among their collaborators. Their presence alone ensures this project isn’t a vanity statement or attention-getting stunt. And Cherry’s quick, early-career stints with the Slits and Nails—as well as the hip originality and social commentary punctuating her 1989 debut’s blend of R&B, hip-hop, and rock—afford her the credibility to tackle fare by Ornette Coleman, Suicide, and MF Doom without coming off as a pretender. She sounds like anything but, often stepping away and letting her mates—on the same footing as the namesake headliner—make the big, slinky, uproarious noise one would expect to find in an underground, late-night European jazz hall.

Cherry contributes only one original, “Cashback,” a tune that casually flaunts flexible rhythmic parameters, her vocals perfumed with a come-hither breathiness that lend to the chess-like playfulness. As the leadoff track, it serves as a digestible appetizer of what follows: creaking, cracking, squeaking, and bleating horn passages; off-the-hinge solo turns that boil to a frenzy before each instrumentalist retreats to their separate corners; percussion that stays behind the beat, fostering swampy textures and zigzagging lines

that trace the arcs of Cherry’s twisty melodic deliveries. While her cohorts occasionally engage in blowout sessions, Cherry retains a cool poise, her timbre smeared with lipstick, sass, and persuasion. The group’s knack for knowing when to hold back, and when to let loose, directly accounts for the record’s exoticism and appeal.

An interpretation of Martina Topley-Bird’s “Too Tough To Die” begins cautiously, evoking visions of late-night danger and mystique. Following the mood-setting intro, Cherry enters with a pouty attitude while the band works into a lather, the arrangement scuffling, rumbling, and driving with inertia. Ugliness and beauty collide on a sublime read of Suicide’s “Dream Baby Dream,” witness to a mellow finish at odds with the skronk sections plugging up the song’s midsection. The quartet chops the pace of the Stooges’ “Dirt” and lives to brag about it; the progressive build-up collects gunk, grime, and gristle as it moves forward, everyone losing control only after Cherry recites the phrase “touch me.” The climactic eruption underscores a sexual vibe—and reinforces, on what’s one of the most unexpected partnerships in memory, a chemistry that’s as outside-the-box as it is natural. —**Bob Gendron**



### Sigur Ros

*Valtari*  
XL Recordings, CD or 2LP

**E**mily had music nerd appeal. Well, has, rather, as she’s still alive, just not a part of this writer’s life. Tall and dark-haired, and with a footwear collection that seemingly consists only of boots, Emily said things like, “In college, all I listened to was Sigur Ros. It helped me fall asleep.”

Makes sense, as Sigur Ros songs don’t build so much as drift, the journey ultimately more important than the destination. Often, the voice of singer Jónsi Birgisson melds into the arrangements, his falsetto sounding more like some heretofore unknown string or wind instrument, and the end musical result often regularly fit for the hippest spa in town. That is a compliment, just one that doesn’t do Sigur Ros justice. This is art—especially the latter half of *Valtari*—that’s otherworldly, the soundtrack to a satellite drifting away in space, provided the galaxy had a record player.

Now back to Emily. She came to mind while listening to *Valtari*, the Icelandic band’s first studio album of new material since 2008. Some compositions, such as the epic “Var” and the title track, into which the former slinks, don’t really feel like songs at all. They’re worming shape-shifters, and at certain moments are little more than the sound of carefully struck piano keys or delicately balanced wind chimes. At no point, however, does this Sigur Ros collection feel like music to which to fall asleep. The record gets spun on many an evening, post-midnight, with only night-lights and a kitten to distract, but *Valtari* ultimately turns out to be grippingly somber, the patiently space-filling sound of insomnia.

Much of it is vocal-less, and when Birgisson does sing, as on “Ekki m,” his voice is obscured by digital scratches, buried beneath a futuristic turntable. Violin strings are bent and stressed, and appear to just hang in mid-air. Though Birgisson doesn’t sing in English, one will swear—or hope—he’s repeatedly saying the word “love.” It would lend a sense of optimism to the darkness, to the orchestral squirms and stark piano that dominate.

It won’t be easy to discover Birgisson’s lyrical intent, however, as Sigur Ros has created its own language for its vocals. Such pretension is for the best. When the album comes to a close with the seven-plus-minute “Fj,” on which a mournful piano is overtaken by a soft-swelling panic of organic and manufactured noises, it becomes clear that this is music fit for a mystery rather than making a connection. —**Todd Martens**

**N**ick Waterhouse is a young man with a very old sound. On his debut full-length, *Time's All Gone*, the burgeoning soul singer comes across like a relic from another time—as though he's been stowed away in a bomb shelter since the 1950s, a la Brendan Fraser in the admittedly awful 1999 film *Blast From the Past*.

In many senses, Waterhouse might seem an unlikely ambassador for the rowdy, R&B-steeped sound pioneered by the likes of Ike Turner & His Kings of Rhythm. Earlier this year at South by Southwest, the clean-cut singer walked onstage dressed in navy slacks and a crisp white button-up, looking as if he'd mistakenly wandered away from a nearby sales convention. But there's no denying what happens when the 25-year-old Huntington Beach native opens his mouth to sing. And he packs his debut with the requisite swagger ("If you want trouble, you got it," he growls on one tune) and sadness (the tortured vamp of "Teardrop Will Follow You") the genre requires.

Like most soul men, Waterhouse can't quite figure out the fairer sex—a statement, it's safe to say, that could extend to the entire male population—and he spends much of *Time's All Gone* pledging his devotion ("Raina"), struggling to get a word in edge-wise ("Is That Clear"), and handing himself over in entirety to a woman that will likely cause him nothing but hurt ("I Can Only Give You Everything"). Yet Waterhouse rarely sounds broken or beaten down, turning out hip-shaking songs that alternately strut, preen, and swing.



**NICK WATERHOUSE**  
**TIME'S ALL GONE**

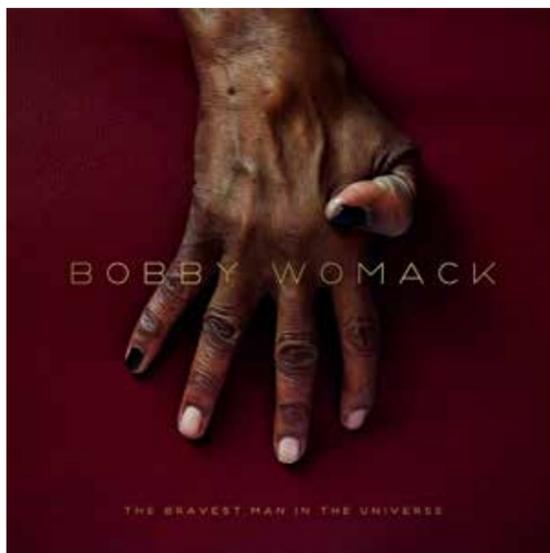
**Nick Waterhouse**

*Time's All Gone*

Innovative Leisure, CD or 180g LP

"Some Place," for one, thunders along on a piano line that plays like an homage to Little Richard, full-throated blasts of brass and chirping female backing vocals appearing while Waterhouse howls like a man thisclose to coming completely unglued. "Time's All Gone Pt. 1," a saxophone-spiked sock hop, sounds like a tune the DJ might have spun during *Back to the Future's* Enchantment Under the Sea dance. "Indian Love Call," by contrast, is far murkier—a spooky midnight incantation colored with staccato guitar and deep sax moans.

Sure, there are occasional moments when the frontman stumbles into reductive, soul-by-the-numbers ("Say I Wanna Know," for one, could be a Dap-Kings throwaway), and he still isn't all that convincing playing the tough, as he attempts to do on the brawny "(If) You Want Trouble." But by immersing himself so fully in the past—the crackling songs on *Time's All Gone* were even recorded on vintage analog equipment—Waterhouse has fully established himself as one to watch in the future. —**Andy Downing**


**Bobby Womack**

*The Bravest Man in the Universe*  
XL, CD or LP

**B**obby Womack's first album of original material in nearly two decades is news. But since the record is co-produced by Blur/Gorillaz frontman Damon Albarn and released by hip indie imprint XL Recordings, it easily qualifies as the year's most surprising nobody-saw-it-coming development. Given these circumstances, and Womack's 68-year-old age, can *The Bravest Man in the Universe* be anything but another attempt by a Baby Boomer artist to contemplate death, regret, and fortitude in their twilight years?

Fortunately, yes. Not that the reconciliatory themes of the first two songs (the title track and "Please Forgive My Heart") hint otherwise. Besides, after a five-decade-plus career that's witnessed Womack endure drug addictions, a controversial marriage, and a precipitous creative decline—not to mention being under-recognized as an R&B architect due to his early guises as a guitarist and songwriter—the dude is more than entitled to making peace with the world and himself, particularly after the long layoff. In a seemingly solitary state, the Cleveland native reflects and pontificates as if on his knees before his master.

Deeper in register than during his heyday, his huskily velvet timbre still lends to falsetto cries, closed-eyes concentration, and hunched-over postures tied to his church roots. Scored only with a gently strummed acoustic guitar, "Deep River" resonates as a moving spiritual witness to the record's finest vocal performance. "Please Forgive My Heart" also borrows from the preacher's pulpit, with shifty programmed beats mimicking handclaps and a slowly unfolding arrangement underscoring the feel, need, and desire of a man begging for mercy. "Stupid" concerns subjects related to god and faith, yet, apart from mellow 88 notes and a group-sung wordless refrain, shares more in common with hip-hop soul than sacred traditions.

Contemporary touches, and how they shape and

impact the songs, are as big a story as Womack's vocal cords. Graceful, concise piano fills abet a majority of tracks, giving the singer a jazz-flecked bed over which to emote. Albarn also decorates structures with an array of atmospheric beats. Heard in combination with a droning organ and dark textures on the superb "Sweet Baby Now," on which Womack steps into the wandering shoes of an individual alienated by loss, the devices enrich the experience and even mesh with old-school telephone rings tacked onto the coda. Similarly, the distorted chorus and repeated scratches on "Nothin' Can Save Ya" work in tandem with the song's remote tenor.

Several experiments, however, fall short. The festive gospel send-up "Jubilee (Don't Let Nobody Turn You Around)" features annoying, computerized pulses that sound as if they are ripped straight out of a super-sized Super Mario Brothers game. Womack is colossally mismatched with it-girl Lana Del Rey on the duet "Dayglo Reflection," throughout which the latter's languid, breathy lounge-kitten timbre fails to blend with the crumpled rhythms. It, and the limp 80s synthesizer-and-drum-machine combination during "Love Is Gonna Lift You Up," serves as a keen reminder that it's not always necessary to update classic fashions with the emperor's new clothes no matter how cool such accoutrements may seem at the time.

—**Bob Gendron**

**N**ear the close of *Fear Fun*, former Fleet Foxes drummer Josh Tillman explains his musical rebirth as Father John Misty, singing, "I never liked the name Joshua/I got tired of J."

Likely driven by a similar sense of boredom, the newborn frontman abandoned his former band at the height of the Seattle crew's popularity. He now claims he spent the months following his departure on a drug-fueled, cross-country van trek—think *Fear and Loathing* with more facial hair and fuzzier sweaters—before finally settling down in the Laurel Canyon neighborhood of Los Angeles. Though Tillman might have racked up thousands of miles on his odometer fleeing the Foxes, sonically he landed but a stone's throw away. His debut arrives awash in an array of familiar sounds: shaggy acoustic strumming, handclaps, church organs, and gorgeous vocal harmonies that call to mind Sunday service at a pastoral church.

But while there's never any doubt the Fleet Foxes consider themselves Very Serious Artists—songs are polished to a heavenly gloss and Robin Pecknold, the ensemble's singer-songwriter, spends much of his time pondering his place in modern society and the universe as a whole—Father John spends much of *Fear Fun* churning out freewheeling gut-busters about American oil dependence, funeral crashers, celebrity culture, and his newfound Hollywood home.


**Father John Misty**

*Fear Fun*  
Sub Pop, CD or LP

On "I'm Writing a Novel," a galloping, organ-and-piano-fueled ditty that comes across like a lost cut from Harry Nilsson's *Duet on Mon Dei*, Tillman comically eviscerates his fellow Canyon denizens, taking aim at the would-be authors that sit around drinking poppy tea and discussing Heidegger and Sartre (rather than, you know, writing) and the various d-celebs populating cafes and restaurants in the hopes someone might recognize them. "Funtimes in Babylon," in turn, plays like a California tourism advertisement as imagined by Jeff Spicoli. "Smoke everything in sight with every girl I've ever loved," he sings. "Look out Hollywood, here I come."

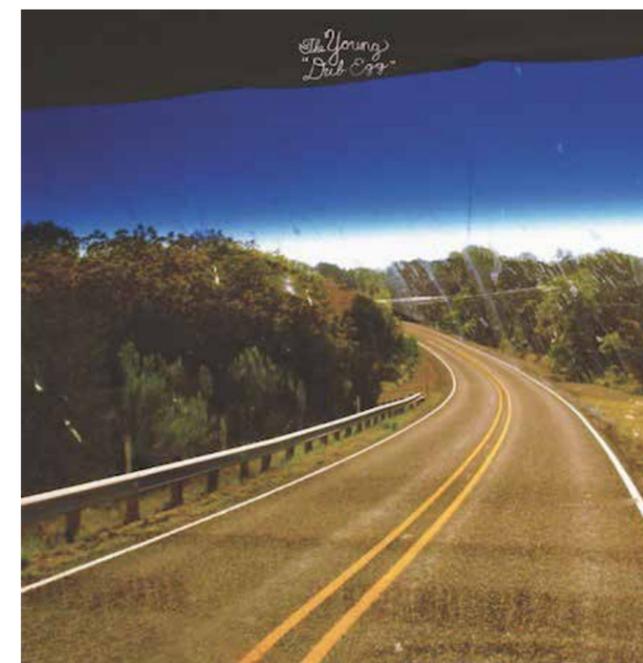
Elsewhere, Tillman does his best Neil Young impression on "Hollywood Forever Cemetery Sings," an invigorating stampede of caveman drums and fuzzed-out guitars with lyrics that come off akin to a darkly comic twist on David Cronenberg's *Crash*. "O I Long to Feel Your Arms Around Me," a deliberate hymnal set to sighing church organ, ventures closest to Fleet Foxes territory. "Now I'm Learning to Love the War," a deliciously tongue-in-cheek piano ditty, explores the reasons even the most ardently liberal music fan should think about peeling that anti-war bumper sticker off of their Prius.

"Try not to think so much about the truly staggering amount of oil that it takes to make a record," he sings. "All the shipping, the vinyl, the cellophane lining, the high-gloss, the tape, and the gear." As the song closes, Tillman envisions a day when his decomposed remains might be used in a similar manner, singing, "I sure hope they make something useful out of me."

It's not the kind of message one typically hears emanating from the modernist hippie enclave of Laurel Canyon. Still, as he proves time and again on this wonderfully off-kilter effort, Father John Misty is far from the typical musician. —**Andy Downing**



©Photo by Ben Aqua



### The Young

*Dub Egg*  
Matador, CD or LP

**While the Young have a name that isn't the easiest to Google, given its sophomore *Dub Egg*, the band won't likely stay anonymous for long.**

Matador Records and the alt-rock era are intertwined. Acts such as Pavement, Superchunk, and even Liz Phair celebrated a form of rock n' roll that resided just left of the dial. There were hooks and there was craftsmanship, but it felt, occasionally, stumbled upon. Matador, ultimately, grew up and gradually got more sophisticated, bringing in acts such as Belle & Sebastian and the New Pornographers—groups with more orchestral ambitions.

Yes, this history lesson is Cliffs Notes short, and like anything in the class of rock n' roll theory, is subject to digressions and counterpoints. Of late, Matador has gotten back to its more ragged beginnings.

Acts like Ceremony and Fucked Up, as precise as their approach to hard rock may be, still celebrate the label's more reckless early days. Now, add quartet the Young to the imprint's list of alt-rock-era champions. The Austin-based act comes off, at times, like a more streamlined Dinosaur Jr.

But enough with reference points. The Young shows there's plenty of mileage left yet in guitar-based rock. In *Dub Egg*, the band presents a 10-song set that touches on a different genre and era with each track. All the while, it never strays from its mission of exploring riffs and solos.

"Livin' Free" starts off the experience in a smoked-out haze, with the upper-register scratchiness of vocalist Hans Zimmerman sinking into the guitars. Later, "Dance With the Ramblers" parties

like the 70s never ended, carrying on for more than six minutes with a cowbell-accentuated rhythm as well as guitars that crisscross like fading smoke from duel skywriters. "Don't Hustle for Love," meanwhile, features more of a fuzzed-up crunch, built around a choppy and funky bass, while "Only Way Out" strikes a boozed-up, bluesy vibe—like something that should be played on a dive-bar jukebox in New Jersey. Even when the band tightens up ("White Cloud"), the focus remains on quivering guitar strikes and lightly decorated solos, accouterments that emphasize the melody.

While the Young have a name that isn't the easiest to Google, given its sophomore *Dub Egg*, the band won't likely stay anonymous for long.

—Todd Martens

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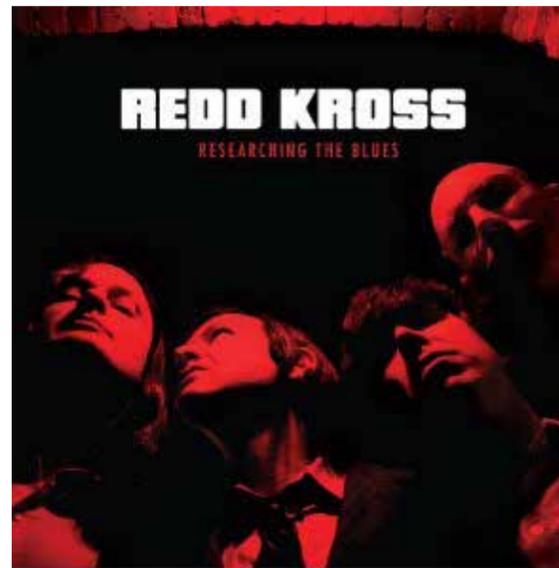


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### Redd Kross

*Researching the Blues*  
Merge Records, CD or LP

**T**his summer, a band consisting of brothers, and one formed in the L.A. area in the 70s, has been cashing in on the reunion circuit. That band is not Redd Kross. As Van Halen rose to fame with increasingly technical songs, centering on topics that occasionally bordered on juvenile, brothers Steven and Jeff McDonald of Redd Kross were simply being juvenile.

With the risk of over-romanticizing the past, it's enough to simply state that the Los Angeles of Redd Kross was far removed from the one of celebrity excess plaguing the Sunset Strip. While bratty behavior may be a staple of most, if not all, youthful rock n' roll scenes, Redd Kross aligned itself with the early days of L.A. punk, where self-deprecation and cynicism took precedence over lusting and soloing. Long before Van Halen declared itself "Hot for Teacher," Redd Kross was too bored with the whole ritual to even notice. "I hate my school," Jeff shouted his voice hoarse in 1980, before he was old enough to vote.

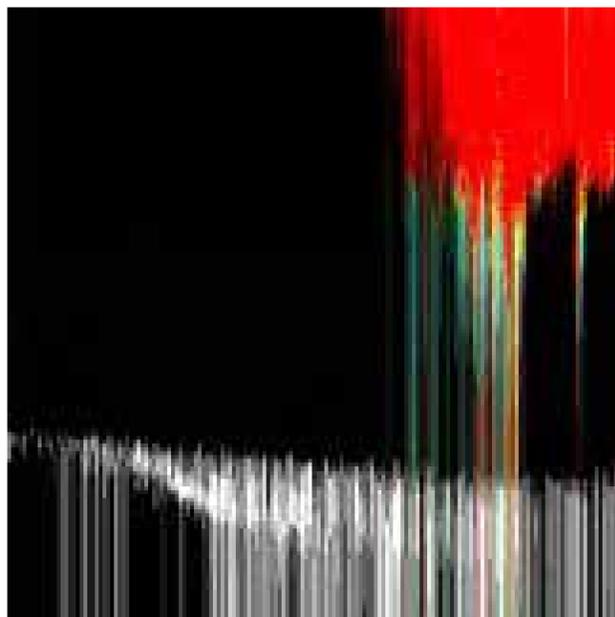
More than three decades later, on Redd Kross' first album in 15 years, the cynicism is trained on more adult concerns. Call it age-appropriate disenchantment. "You're getting uglier, I'm getting uglier, we're getting uglier," Jeff sings on "Uglier," turning an aging not-so-gracefully mantra into a full-band sing-along, one complete with backing vocal woo-woos. Heck, "Stay Away From Downtown" is all old-man crankiness, with Jeff warning up top, "Remember, your life was once good." This isn't a band living in the past; instead, it's one haunted by it.

In fact, bitterness seems to be inversely related to a song's cheeriness. "One of the Good Ones" beckons with a shuffling beat and skip-to-work handclaps, all while the band expresses shock—shock!—that someone in its hometown doesn't have an ulterior motive. Later, sunny weather is little more than a pesky light that shines on Jeff's face in "Winter Blues," a snappy global-warming lament with brightly textured guitar work that echoes 70s-era George Harrison.

It all feels rather natural. As Redd Kross bounced around labels throughout the 80s and 90s, the band's sound gradually smoothed out, progressing from scrappy, how-fast-can-you-go snottiness to irresistibly melodic power-pop. *Researching the Blues*, surprisingly, falls somewhere in the middle, presenting a late-career Redd Kross that knows the importance of brevity—no song breaches the four-minute barrier—as well as the joy of a swooning, Beach Boys-inspired multi-part harmony ("Dracula's Daughter").

And, it's not all that far removed, in fact, from more recent singles from Superchunk, the tightly focused pop-punk band behind Redd Kross' current label, Merge Records. *Researching the Blues* also makes the case that Redd Kross accomplished one of the rarest of rock n' roll feats: growing up.

—Todd Martens



### The Flaming Lips

*The Flaming Lips and Heady Fwends*  
Warner Bros., CD or LP

**A**s the alt-generation's band of merry pranksters, the Flaming Lips have been afforded generous leniency regarding creative projects and maverick decisions. Not that earlier moves required much defense. For instance, the costumed animals that jump around onstage amidst glitter, confetti, and balloons evoke the Oklahoma collective's *joie de vivre*. Leader Wayne Coyne's unorthodox visual concoctions—ranging from fake blood dripping down his face to his UFO contraptions—contribute to the ensemble's *Wizard of Oz*-like sense of youthful imagination and pacifist, nonconformist rebellion.

The long-running group claims a similar history of mythical experimentalism in the studio, too, with the results often both mind-rattling and emotionally rewarding. The four-disc *Zaireeka*, designed to be played back simultaneously, or in various combinations wherein one disc abets another, is immersive do-it-yourself psychedelia at its finest—and the only such attempt of its kind from a big-name band. Weirdness, it appears, remains the only consistent and essential impetus behind the Lips' every move. Yet, for the last few years, some of the madcap antics seem at best forced and, at worst, unintentionally caricatural.

Credit (or blame) the commercial success of 2003's *Yoshimi Battles the Pink Robots*—as well as the subsequent exposure made possible by the Lips' then-ubiquitous presence on destination-festival lineups. However ironic, mainstream acceptance apparently authorized for a limitless period the collective's license to do as it pleases. Coyne's carefree Twitter feeds—and his nearly 100,000 followers—only add to the sense that the band has crossed the fine line between cool and annoying. Now, the group looks as if it's embracing oddities just for the sake of looking unconventional, its maneuvers frequently silly and disposable compared to the past, when the bizarre methods stimulated a creative field that yielded joyous concerts and a string of exceptional albums.

©Photo by J. Michelle Martin



Preceded by the release of a seven-pound gummy-bear containing a flashdrive with four songs, several limited-edition tour-only EPs, and a ridiculous six-hour-long tune (only to be topped several months later by a 24-hour-long ditty), the collaborative *The Flaming Lips and Heady Fwends*

arrives as the latest parody-inviting misfire from a band that's become increasingly impossible to consider seriously. No, the Lips have never subscribed to sternness or solemnity, yet their music, in spite of the peculiarities and humor, could always be appreciated as significant art.

Featuring standalone tracks with artists ranging from Yoko Ono to Lightning Bolt and Erykah Badu, this odds-and-sods collection barely passes muster as a curiosity item. Rather, it evokes what might happen if a corporate entity purchased control of an underground rave or independent nightclub from their original owners. The place and setting seem familiar, but the atmosphere and flavor have changed.

Oodles of trippy effects, bizarre noises, and logic-defying electronics are packed into the songs and aim to mystify the senses. But it all sounds and feels calculated, the experience a controlled attempt at fun and chaos, and a boring co-option of the authenticity and vision that mark early Lips works like *In a Priest Driven Ambulance*—efforts that despite their flaws, ooze character and personality. Somewhere, amidst a desire to keep calling attention to their strangeness and goofiness, the Lips lost the plot and their identity. A final reservation concerning the band's contemporary worth needs to be withheld until its forthcoming studio album—due in the fall, and its last under contract with Warner Bros.—yet if recent history is any indication, hope that Coyne and company hired a good editor. —**Bob Gendron**



# The Afghan Whigs

**Metro**

Chicago, Illinois

By Bob Gendron

Photos by Chad Kamenshine

**G**reg Dulli promised beforehand that the Afghan Whigs' sold-out Lollapalooza afterparty show at Metro would be unlike any other thus far on the band's reunion tour. He wasn't lying. A day removed from playing a well-received albeit time-limited late-afternoon slot at the Chicago destination festival, the vocalist led his group through a full-on, two-hour revue-style spectacular that managed to equal—and in most cases, surpass—the ensemble's prior appearances at the club.

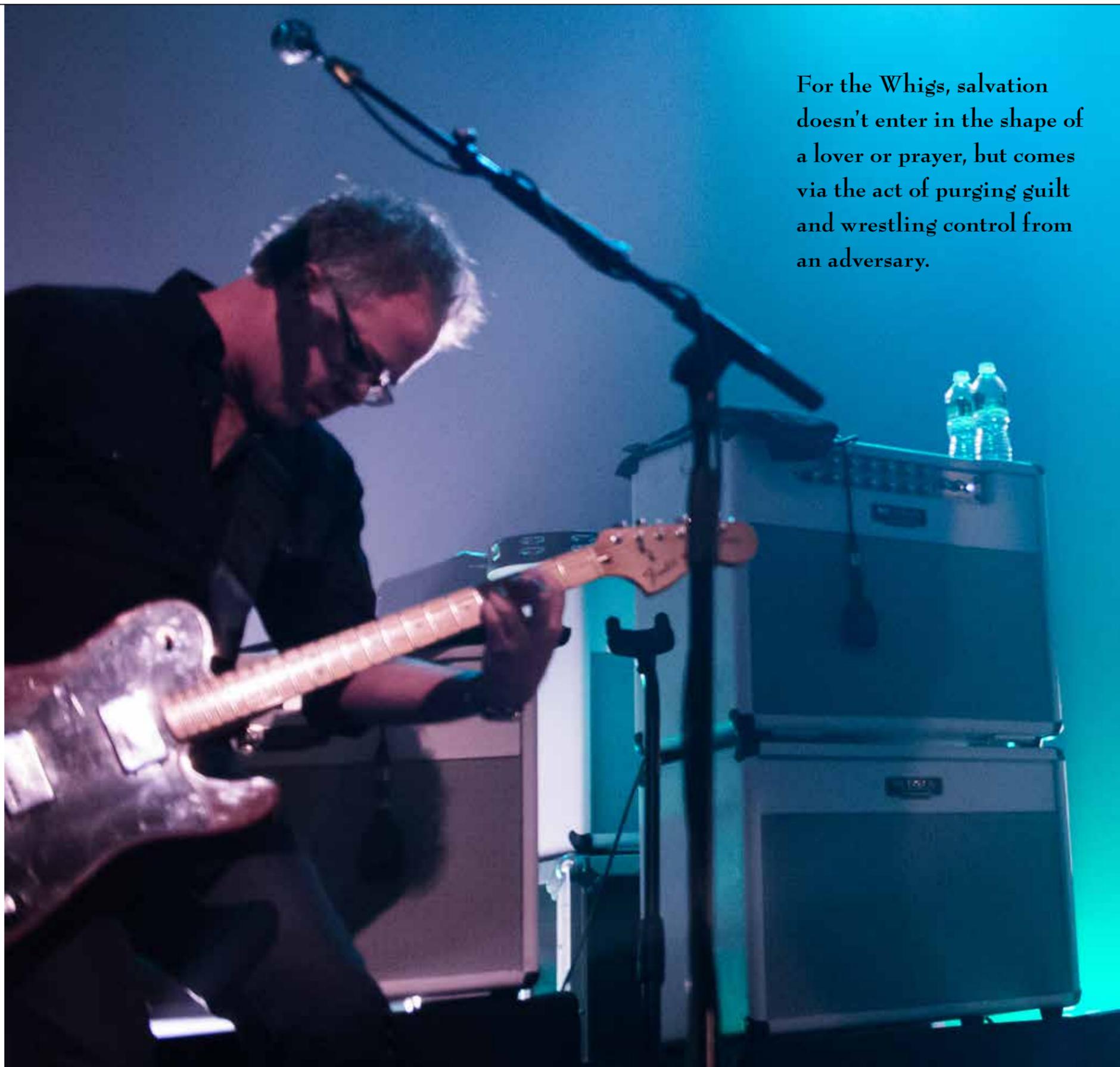
Given the Whigs' long history at the venue during their original tenure, which involved gigs before they signed to Sub Pop, matching the searing intensity of their 1993 *Gentlemen* date, self-flagellating drama of 1996's two-night stand for the *Black Love* jaunt, and the sweaty, multi-hour R&B affairs for the 1965 tour—a stint that witnessed Dulli enjoy the large backing band he'd always wanted—proved unthinkable. Then there's the challenge of a reformed band, cited by many critics during its heyday as one of the best live acts around, trying to avoid ruining its reputation with banal nostalgia and weakened performances.

But like nearly everything else on this evening, Herculean feats and unmitigated ambition seemed the order of business. Whether sheerly driven by Dulli's refusal to back down from a challenge or the collective desire to give Metro owner and longtime Whigs fan Joe Shanahan an early Christmas present in the form of one of the most memorable concerts his space has hosted in the past decade, the Whigs had much to prove, a clutch of musicians out to demonstrate why their cult following has forever championed their music—and their shows—as perspective-altering experiences. It was as if they'd never amicably broken up, as if the senselessly violent beating of Dulli by a Texas redneck that nearly killed him in late 1998 and, effectively, brought about the end of the Whigs less than a year later, never occurred.

Indeed, in securing backup vocalists Susan Marshall and Steve Meyers—the same personnel from the 1965 outing—as well as a second guitarist, additional backup vocalist, a multi-instrumentalist, and a three-piece horn section to flesh out the arrangements, the Whigs essentially picked up where they left off more than 13 years ago, only this time entertaining several generations of fans that heard mythological-sized stories about their prowess but which didn't catch them during the original run.

Differences between then and now? Dulli's voice is now even stronger, more confident, able to hit higher notes, and push with supreme conviction due to his having quit smoking and kicked addictions. The Whigs are even tighter, and came across as larger, courtesy of brassy rejoinders and powerhouse harmonies, both of which furthered the lusty temptation and soulful rhythms on dance-inviting songs such as "John the Baptist."

Not that the group relied on horns, which didn't even play half of the set. No, the in-the-pocket sway, blown-up guitar fills, bruising knock-out-punch hooks, and lyrical daggers largely arrived courtesy of Dulli, a completely slimmed-down and constantly smiling John Curley on bass, and the anonymous-shy guitarist Rick McCollum, whose subtle slide work injected primal, bluesy figures into the combustible mélange. His contributions allowed despair, loss, and painful truisms on "When We Two Parted" to sink in deeper. On the ferocious "Gentlemen," he and Dulli's guitars brawled, turning

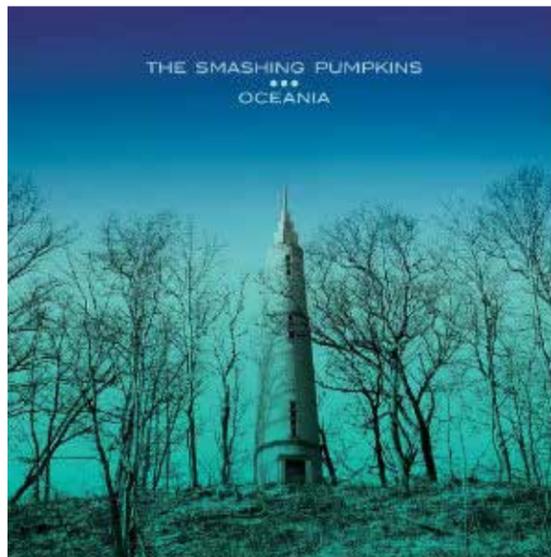


**For the Whigs, salvation doesn't enter in the shape of a lover or prayer, but comes via the act of purging guilt and wresting control from an adversary.**

the searing number into a battering ram for disgust, sickness, and deception all the while Dulli pointed to individuals in the crowd, dealing infection and scorn to the masses on a one-by-one basis.

Dressed sharply and looking svelte, the outspoken frontman lost none of his charisma, charm, or hypnotic command. "You can wonder what I'm thinking about your girlfriend while singing these songs," he teased, the consummate ladies man. "It's all good, I guarantee it." These smirking revelations jived with a suave persona that shuffled during the sexy come-ons of "66" (complete with a brief interlude of Prince's "Little Red Corvette"), assumed the role of a playboy for the kinky funk of "Neglected," and brought spurned anguish to a vicious "You My Flower."

For all the bluster, a pair of recently adopted covers—Frank Ocean's "Lovecrimes" and Marie Queenie Lyons' "See and Don't See"—registered the band's ability to take it all the way down, to channel vulnerability and dreary heartbreak, to lurk in dark shadows few dare to occupy. For the Whigs, salvation doesn't enter in the shape of a lover or prayer, but comes via the act of purging guilt and wresting control from an adversary. Vide, the imaginary gospel angels that flew in for "Faded," personal catharsis magnified for public proportions, an arena-made epic that aptly concluded with refrains from "Purple Rain" to wash all the sinners clean. ●



**Smashing Pumpkins**  
*Oceania*  
EMI, CD or 2LP

This incessant need to prove himself to doubters has no doubt fueled much of Corgan's musical exploration over the last ten-plus years, including a short-lived stint with the better-than-its-fate Zwan, a here-and-gone solo album, and even a *Weekend at Bernie's*-like attempt at resurrecting the Pumpkins with drummer Jimmy Chamberlin for the 2007 snoozer *Zeitgeist*. With that in mind, it's somewhat comforting that Corgan, 45, appears to have finally found a measure of peace on *Oceania*. "I'll kiss anyone tonight," he sings on "Violet Rays," like a giddy teen tripping on ecstasy.

Throughout *Oceania*, the frontman, in the midst of penning a 900-page-plus "spiritual memoir," sounds like he's on some sort of religious quest. Songs touch on deities ("God right on! Krishna right on!" he cheerleads on "Quasar"), self-enlightenment ("The Chimera"), and the redemptive power of faith ("Inkless"). At times, Corgan comes across a bit too much like a new-age shaman. "Your stars align, and you let me and your heart win," he proclaims on one tune. But more often than not, he sounds like a man still struggling to find answers of his own.

Corgan is joined on his search by a new band of travelers, including guitarist Jeff

Schroeder, drummer Mike Byrne, and bassist Nicole Florentino, who chips in with spectral vocal harmonies on a handful of tunes. Though the frontman has long been labeled a control freak, *Oceania* truly comes across like the product of a full-on band rather than the work of one man with an iron fist and limitless studio access. "Quasar" sets the tone, piling on thundering drums, Corgan's nasal sneer, and agitated guitars that churn and swirl like stormy ocean waters. "The Chimera" sounds even more like vintage Pumpkins, opening with a churlish guitar riff that calls to mind *Siamese Dream*'s "Rocket."

Elsewhere, Corgan and Co. pull back for the dreamy "Pale Horse," toy with disco-pop on the proggy, pulsating "One Diamond One Heart," and ease into stately rockers like "Pinwheels"—a tune that takes flight on airy strings, Florentino's gorgeous backing vocals, and a guitar solo that drifts, circles, and swoops hawk-like above the fray. Still, it's an earlier moment that resonates most strongly on the long-overdue comeback effort.

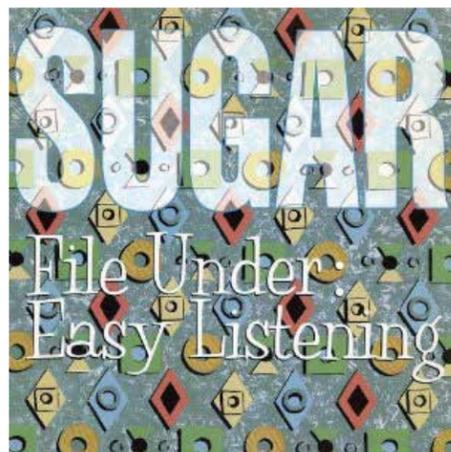
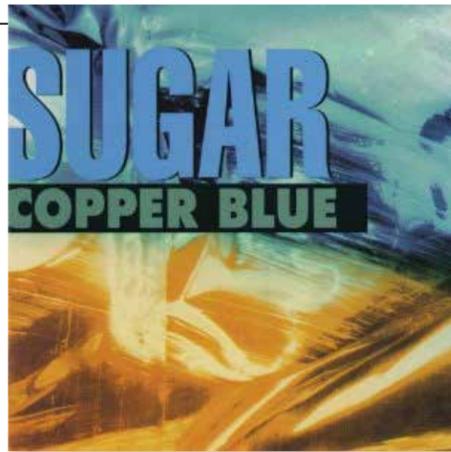
"It takes some life to find the light within," sings a chastened Corgan on "The Chimera." Consider *Oceania* the sound of a creative spark reignited. —**Andy Downing**

**F**or years, Smashing Pumpkins frontman Billy Corgan—long an avowed fan of professional wrestling—has reveled in playing the heel. Over the last decade, the singer has feuded with former bandmates (most notably, former Pumpkins guitarist James Iha), musical collaborators (his Twitter spat with Courtney Love are borderline epic), and, during a particularly confrontational 2008 tour, his own fans.

In a phone interview last fall, the vocalist copped to harboring a massive chip on his shoulder, saying, "When I was young I wanted people to say, 'Hey, you're somebody.'"

The advertisement features a dark background with a human skull in profile on the left. On the right, a pair of headphones is shown with a braided cable. The background is overlaid with faint, technical diagrams and text, including "FIGURE 1", "FIGURE 2", "070" WALL THICK", "11.5 OFHC INSULATION", "110", "TUBE FILLER", "AWG 17.5 OFHC INSULATION", and "TAPES WRAP". The Cardas logo is visible on the cable.

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**Sugar**  
*Copper Blue*  
*File Under: Easy Listening*  
 Merge, 2CD and 3CD  
 (also available on LP)

Flanked by bassist David Barbe and drummer Malcolm Travis, Mould and Sugar's 1992 debut *Copper Blue* is a thesis on how to be tunefully assertive. Only one proper full-length followed, 1994's *File Under: Easy Listening*; both are now receiving the deluxe reissue treatment from Merge Records.

Irresistible moments abound. "If I Can't Change Your Mind" is as perfect a pop song as one could wish for, full of glistening, jangly guitars and young-love longing. "A Good Idea," also from *Copper Blue*, is more sinister, with Mould a silent witness to murder while the guitar and drums saw away at each other. Songs on *File Under: Easy Listening* are, broadly speaking, more expansive, from the sludgy ballad "Explode and Make Up" to the boomeranging melodies and harmonies of "Can't Help You Anymore."

As to whether or not the reissues are worth purchasing, Merge priced the sets low enough that long-time fans needn't stress. At about \$15 for the two-disc *File Under: Easy Listening* set, and \$18 for the three-disc *Copper Blue/Beaster* set, those who own the originals aren't being gouged. While the two live discs—one abets each studio album—may lean more toward the "for diehards-only" crowd, they more than adequately capture the controlled chaos of a Sugar show. Of note is the 1992 Chicago performance on the *Copper Blue* package, a gig recorded at Cabaret Metro that always feels on the verge of running off the rails.

More B-sides come stuffed onto the *File Under: Easy Listening* disc, and while most of these cuts have already been released on prior collections, it's nice to have many of these gems in one place. "Going Home" has grunge-era crunch and soda-fountain sweetness, while "In the Eyes of My Friends" boasts a swiftly direct vocal turn from Barbe.



©Photo by Peter Ellenby

*Copper Blue* comes with a more stripped-down "If I Can't Change Your Mind," turning the tune into what feels like a long lost Byrds track. There's also the fan-favorite fist-pumper "Needle Hits E," something of alt-rock-era anomaly. It's unabashed about its desire to have a good time, and Mould isn't going to let his bummer friends bring him down. "I cherish the day," he sings, "when you say the things you feel."

The *Copper Blue* set is the first set casual listeners should target. The album on its own boasts more instantly grabbing hooks than its follow-up, and the six-track EP *Beaster* has only improved with age. While Mould hadn't shied away from the rough stuff in Hüsker Dü, the EP's 1993 arrival was a head-scratching departure from *Copper Blue*. It predated

Smashing Pumpkins' *Mellon Collie and the Infinite Sadness* by two years, but the religious imagery, feedback, and schizophrenic tonal shifts do Billy Corgan proud.

It's arguable, however, that the most exciting aspect of these reissues isn't even heard anywhere on these discs. As Mould has been revisiting this material in concert, having performed *Copper Blue* front-to-back to commemorate the album's 20th anniversary, it has, Mould has said in interviews, reinvigorated his approach to power-pop—or, to quote Mould more directly, "aggressive pop."

The rather limited Sugar catalog paints a portrait of an artist that respects pop traditions, and understands that verse-chorus-verse isn't a formula but a tool. Whether the guitars ring and chime

like cymbals, or seem to constantly rev-up in an effort to lap their wielder, Sugar songs were always tightly focused and constantly aimed to soar. If wild, off-the-cuff, musical adventurousness marks the catalog of Hüsker Dü, then Sugar is the search for guitar-rock refinement.

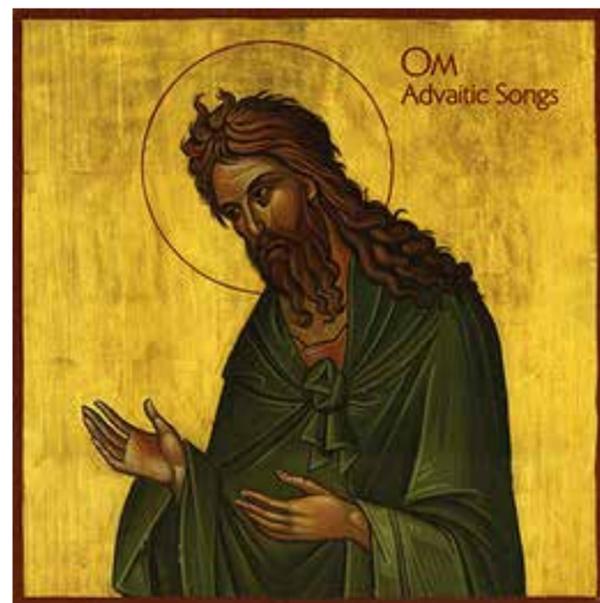
On September 4, Mould will release the tongue-in-cheek titled *Silver Age*, 10 new tracks said to match the intensity of Sugar, and addressed with grown-up reflection. We can only hope, as these reissues will likely increase the craving for new Mould material. For whether it was in Hüsker Dü, Sugar, or his solo work, Mould has consistently attempted to build on the past rather than live in it. —**Todd Martens**

**T**he 90s are doing well of late.

Nostalgia is never really bad for business, but amongst prior decades penetrating modern pop culture, the aforementioned period is getting its moment. The 90s are there in IFC's "Portlandia," where the familiar and the recent are played for laughs, and they're there in reunions from the likes of Pavement and Soundgarden. And look at this year's lineup for the Coachella Valley Music & Arts Festival, as the spring Southern California event featured a host of 90s-made acts, including Jeff Magnum, Pulp, Mazzy Star, and Noel Gallager.

That's a diverse array of artists and influences, but if one were to map the beginnings of the alt-rock era, one man's name would be at the top of the conversation: Bob Mould. His band Hüsker Dü predated all-things 90s, releasing a string of albums in the 80s that challenged listeners with a mix of furious noise and bubblegum pop. As relationships in that band crashed and burned, Mould re-emerged in the post-Nirvana era with the power trio Sugar.

**S**pirituality has long inspired and informed music. Gospel, of course, is built upon the notion of praising a higher power. Traditional and modern blues references religious personas and deities, leaning heavily on taboo and temptation. Mainstream pop, whether George Harrison with *All Things Must Pass* or U2 on any of its earlier albums, incorporates god-related thoughts and scriptures into its messages. Jazz continues to pay homage to supreme beings with divine compositions and freedom-finding passages. And while largely overlooked by most media outlets, an entire subgenre—contemporary Christian—exists in alleged service of the lord.



**OM**  
*Advaitic Songs*  
Drag City, CD or 45RPM 2LP

But in terms of sheer mysticism and ceremonial feel, few styles rank on par with Sufi and other assorted Indian music, whose devotional vibes transmit through intense singing and otherworldly instrumentation. Keeping its mysterious motivations a secret, OM fully embraces such Middle Eastern meditative properties on its enchanted *Advaitic Songs*, a creation bound to generate as many proposterous, hyperbolic references to drugs as member Al Cisneros' former band, Sleep. On this, the duo's fifth full-length, the "doom" and "stoner metal" labels don't apply.

Often evoking an extended prayer chant that takes place in a sun-beaten temple or hallowed

open space, the set completely deviates from Western conventions and finds metaphysical release by means of droning tambouras, sparse hand drums, distant guitars, holy incantations, and exotic percussion. Given that the album's title refers to a branch of Hindu philosophy that rejects separation between the self and universe, and considering Cisneros' history of psychedelic leanings, the arrangements' deliberative and sacred qualities don't come as a shock.

What does, in spite of the heavy and bottom-feeding "State of Non-Return"—the closest example here to metal, even as the arrival of classical strings turn the tune into a reflection on interstellar life forms—is the advanced level of

compositional vision and resonant detail. Undulating frequencies subtly course through a majority of the songs, turning slowly unfolding and progressively ominous tales like "Gethsemane" into a side-winding epic in which invocation, monasticism, and atmospherics amalgamate.

Numerous are the artists laying claim to out-there sonic hypnosis and transcendent aura. Few, however, achieve the incorporeal outsider highs and trance states OM reaches on *Advaitic Songs*, which demands to be listened to as an old-school record: In one sitting, free of distraction and interference, and when possible, on 45RPM vinyl, with grooves as deep as Death Valley. —**Bob Gendron**



**Baroness**  
*Yellow & Green*  
Relapse, 2CD or 2LP

**L**yricaly, much of Baroness' third album—the sprawling, double-disc *Yellow & Green*—finds the hard-rocking Atlanta quartet adrift in unfamiliar terrain. Throughout, frontman John Baizley rarely sounds in control of his own fate. "You lead the way, I'll follow," he sings on one tune. Then, on another: "I thought help was on the way."

While Baizley's words sound born of chaos—life can be snatched away any moment and nothing can be done to stop it, they seemingly suggest—the music moves with almost surgical precision, bleeding from new-wave-inspired burners ("Little Things") to epic prog-rock numbers that evoke Thin Lizzy doing its best Yes impression ("Back Where I Belong").

The album is another evolutionary leap for the band, which lurched out of the primordial ooze with 2007's sludgy, doom-laden *Red Album*. By the release of 2009's *Blue Record* (were these album titles chosen purely to taunt the colorblind?), the crew was already walking upright, tempering its noise-rock side with more elaborate arrangements and a stronger melodic sensibility. With *Yellow & Green*, however, Baroness' metal roots are almost completely obscured, a transformation akin to the foundation of an ancient city paved over to make way for an emerging metropolis.

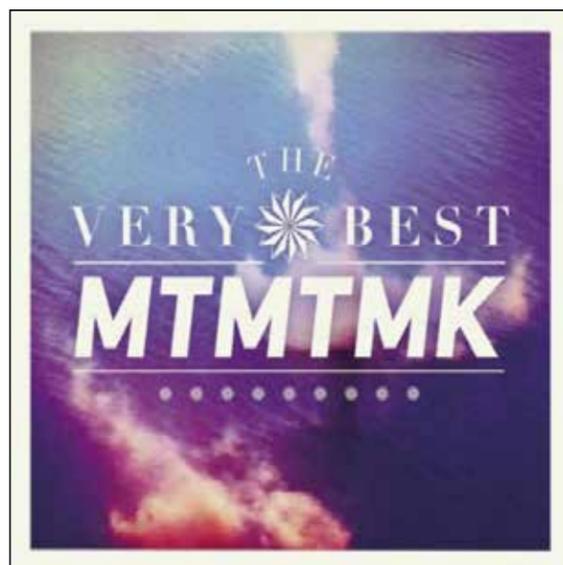
In this sense, the record is sure to have detractors—and there are definitely moments where the grand experiment falls short (the scattershot, new-wave hell of "Psalms Alive" being one example). But more often than not, the group's ambition hits the mark.

Thematically, the *Yellow* disc appears anchored to the sea. It contains numerous mentions of jumping into the abyss, letting water fill your lungs, and witnessing ships set adrift on endless waters. The music, in turn, appears to moves like an ocean—unpredictably wild and foaming one minute (the churning "Cocainium") and calm and expansive the next (the eerily atmospheric "Twinkler").

The darker, softer *Green* disc, by contrast, ventures up into the foothills—"Take me away from the ocean," bellows Baizley on the pummeling pastoral rock of "Board Up the House"—and a handful of the songs take on a folk-like air (particularly the bewitching "Mtns. (The Crown & Anchor)"). At times, music in this mellower second movement threatens to evaporate, particularly as the band eases into the rickety "Collapse." Fortunately, just when it sounds as if Baroness lowers itself into the grave for that final sleep, things roar back to life with the blistering "The Line Between."

"Walk the line between the righteous and the wicked," howls Baizley as drum volleys and twisting guitars whirl around him like shrapnel, "And tomorrow I'll be gone." Till then, the tune suggests, Baroness will be here to dispense artfully constructed carnage.

—**Andy Downing**



### The Very Best

MTMTMK

Moshi Moshi, CD or LP



©Photo by Village Beat

**C**larance Thomas still sits as a conservative, the Middle East remains embattled in turf wars, and sing-along anthems continue to serve as the backdrop for convertible rides, beach parties, and all things summer. Some things never change. Radio-friendly pop music expands and mutates no matter the season, but at no time does it feel more appropriate and integral than during the warmest months. Bright sunshine, outside activities, backyard barbeques, and slinky outfits seemingly demand fare that makes it easy for novices to dance and soars on the kind of elementary choruses committed to memory after just one listen.

While nothing on *MTMTMK* is likely to displace Carly Rae Jepsen's ubiquitous "Call Me Maybe" or Luke Bryan's country-lite "Drunk On You" as 2012's premier driving-with-the-top-down tracks, the second album by the Very Best doesn't suffer any shortage of sun-baked overtures. Moreover, on the addictive "We OK," the bi-continental collective receives an assist from Somalia-born star K'naan, whose own "Hurt Me Tomorrow" is getting a fair share of spins from what's left of the commercial dial. He's one of the nearly dozen guests contributing to a set that never stays in one place too long. Don't like what you're hearing at a given instant? Wait about 30

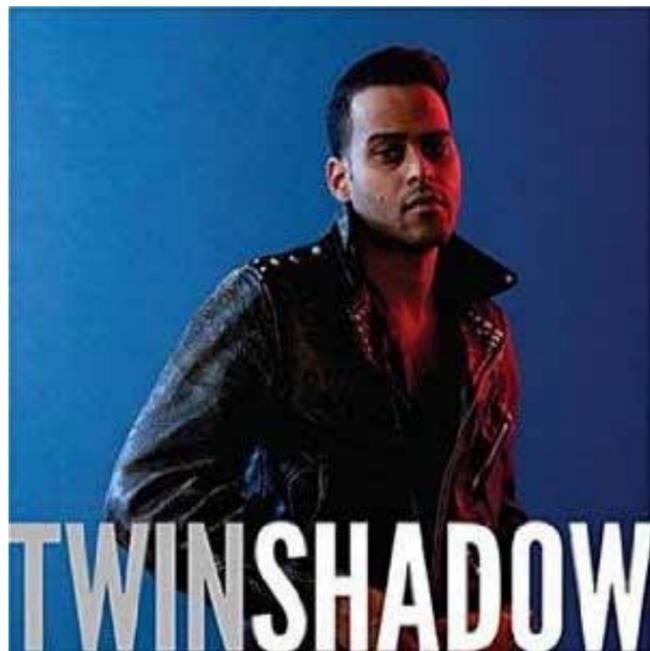
seconds. The sound and vibe will evolve.

Such games of sonic chess are apropos for a group that initially garnered attention after issuing a free mixtape that included collaborations with indie artists like M.I.A. and Santigold. An immediate hit with bloggers, *Esau Mwamwaya and Radioclit are the Very Best*—the self-referencing title reflective of the names of the Malawian singer and London-based production duo, respectively, originally involved in the band—established the ensemble as savvy manipulators and remodelers of primarily existing tunes. On its 2009 debut, *Warm Heart of Africa*,

Mwamwaya stepped to the fore as a formidable vocalist, a multi-lingual *chanteur* able to weave in and out of stylistic mazes whether the latter involve funk, kwaito, or hip-hop.

Distinctive for radiating an ebullient enthusiasm no matter the language of his words, Mwamwaya now casts his eye toward at pop radio—even though he's probably well aware the group's multicultural mélange of Afropop, dancehall, electropop, synthpop, and Europop is too sophisticated for mainstream formats. While the Very Best strays farther here from tradition than on previous efforts, tracks such as the thumping "I Wanna Go Away" and splashy "Come Alive" (complete with choir vocals) pogo with a contemporary vibrancy any big-shot producer would be lucky to concoct for his own clients. And in the hook-bulging "Kondaine," the Very Best claims an uplifting catch phrase ("You're walking on water/You're walking on air") and bright tilt that should put the song inside every soccer stadium north of the Mediterranean.

On occasion, the shifting percussive paradigms and rampant samples grow busy. The album-opening "Adani" establishes the Very Best's aptitude for blending disparate influences and juggling engrossing textures, yet the collision proves too much. Similarly, the breakout rap in "Mghetto" adds little more than unnecessary congestion. Minor annoyances aside, these hiccups expose the understated openness that permeates the rest of the album, wherein rhythms, refrains, and rave-ups collude on one heckuva summer bash. Just add white sand and volleyball net. —**Bob Gendron**


**Twin Shadow**
*Confess*

4AD, CD or LP

Things lots of us agree upon: Batman is better in the hands of Christopher Nolan, “Friday Night Lights” will inspire tears, and Jimmy Fallon’s “Tebowie” is ridiculous, yes, but can we watch it again, please?

Fewer of us may also agree upon the following point, although the modern-day fact-checking machine that is Google will offer less evidence here than on the above points: The 80s were fine and all, but just as we don’t need *Rock of Ages*, we don’t need more synthpop bands.

Twin Shadow was first described to me thusly: “If you love the 80s, you’ll love this. Some songs are even reminiscent of Eddie Money.” The woman who said this didn’t asked to be quoted, so she is being kept anonymous. But she’s an authority on the matter. She’s an executive at Beggar’s Group, the label consortium releasing Twin Shadow’s second album.

Her statement rang true, and if those 16 words of hers sound like an endorsement, stop reading. Twin Shadow, centered around Dominican/American George Lewis Jr., is your new favorite band. Skepticism, however, is allowed, especially when new-wavey keyboards are involved.

Yet *Confess* sees Twin Shadow transitioning from the full-on 80s revival that was 2010’s *Forget* to a rather respectable R&B-inspired outfit. Dreamy keyboard textures remain the primary root of every tune, and songs such as “Golden Light” open with nearly a minute of digitized atmospheres. Vocally, though, Lewis under-sings—he’s a calm, cool and less versatile Prince—and doing so shifts the focus to the soul that underlines each track.

“Five Seconds” would work as a montage in a John Hughes film. It’s an upbeat number that subtly shifts directions with each verse, adding stinging, Hall & Oates-like guitar soloing in one and furious strumming in the next. “Run My Heart” is a ballad at its most dramatic, with Lewis growing more and more frustrated at his inability to reignite a flame, while “Beg for the Night” frames longing with an orchestra of effects—squiggly synths, a “Beat It” guitar, and random earth-quaking rhythms. “I know it’s absurd to cherish every kiss,” Lewis sings, adding a dose of welcome self-awareness to his romantic soundtracks.

As the album progresses, Twin Shadow gets increasingly freaky and weird, ultimately having more in common with the torturous R&B of Drake pal The Weeknd than any prior decade. The beats in “I Don’t Care” sound more like growls than grooves, and what starts as Michael Jackson-esque glossiness devolves into a mess of tangled emotions. There’s a booty call that ends in tears, and all the characters are knowingly lying, making this one retro party that lingers long after the synthesizers are unplugged.

—**Todd Martens**

Laetitia Sadier’s solo debut *The Trip* was written and recorded shortly after the suicide of her younger sister Noelle. While personal tragedy might have first inspired the longtime Stereolab frontwoman to go it alone, her sophomore album, *Silencio*, sounds driven by global issues.

The lush, cinematic opener “The Rule of the Game” borrows both its title and spirit from Jean Renoir’s 1939 evisceration of upper-class French society, *The Rules of the Game*, and plays like a more refined response to the income disparity fueling the ongoing Occupy Wall Street movement. Atop shimmering cymbals, rumbling drums, and droning synths, Sadier sings of a ruling class that neglects responsibility, overindulges its children, and engages in cruel games.

On the Cure-ish “Auscultation to the Nation,” the troublemakers get summoned by name to the front of the classroom. “Rating agencies, financial markets, and the G20s were not elected by the people,” Sadier sings with cool detachment.

Though her political aims are admirable—and, really, it’s hard to fault anyone calling out credit rating agencies, bankers, and the absurdly wealthy—the track is clumsy, burdened by sloganeering lyrics (“What do we care about these self-proclaimed authorities,” she singzzzzzzzz...) that sound particularly clunky amidst the percolating new-wave beat.

Related fears creep in after spotting the title to “There Is a Price to Pay for Freedom (And It Isn’t Security),” but the song projects a cool, lounge-y vibe, as though James Bond had been a TSA agent rather than a globetrotting man of mystery.

Other fare jettisons current events for more spiritual pursuits. A meditative peace pulsates through the dreamy “Find Me the Pulse of the Universe,” which drifts on a soft patter of hand drums. Sadier constructs an electronic Zen garden on “Silent Spot,” a sparse, delicate number awash in gently pinging synthesizers. “Between Earth and Heaven” walks a similar path, and

the singer turns to nature (trees are rooted in the ground but reach for the stars) to help explain spiritual ideals.

No matter the subject matter, the album is anchored by Sadier’s serene voice, which somehow manages to project beauty even during moments when she sings about mankind’s ugliest urges. Strange, then, that a recording so consumed with political and social failings would close with nearly two minutes of silence. Perhaps Sadier hopes other voices will rise up and fill the void. —**Andy Downing**

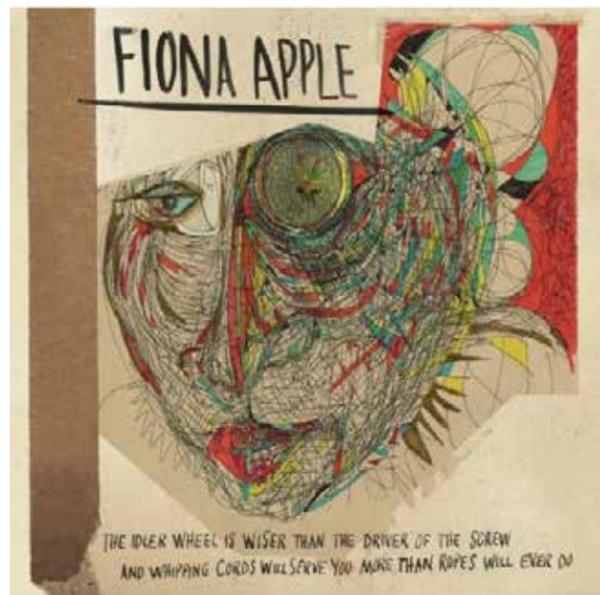

**Laetitia Sadier**
*Silencio*

Drag City, CD or LP

**T**hink of a relationship between two lovers. One, perhaps, that has seen better days, but is not as of yet a full-on disaster. Now picture the couple sitting at a dinner table in silence, as if it's a forced tradition that can't be avoided. "What? What are you thinking?" says one partner. "Nothing," says the other, defensively.

What that really means is nothing that can be easily articulated. But if it were possible, at such a moment, to peer into a mind, and apply music to the images and thoughts someone is having of this soon-to-be-dead relationship, it may very well sound exactly like Fiona Apple's *The Idler Wheel is Wiser than the Driver of the Screw and Whipping Cords Will Serve You More Than Ropes Will Ever Do*.

This is a claustrophobic, exhausting album, one meticulously illustrated with demented, idealism-gone-wrong lyrics and spare, stick-and-stones rhythms—so much so that it can be a difficult listen. When it comes to tension and emotional trauma, the Apple on *The Idler Wheel...* has few, if any, rivals.



#### Fiona Apple

*The Idler Wheel is Wiser than the Driver of the Screw and Whipping Cords Will Serve You More Than Ropes Will Ever Do*  
Epic, CD or LP

This, her first album in seven years, unfolds almost in slow motion. Tears "calcify in my tummy," she sings on "Left Alone," stretching her voice to paranoid heights while a piano melody unfolds like a Vaudeville horror show. Things get even more gruesome on "Regret," where Apple fills her spacious piano quivers with howls, all while envisioning "hot piss" coming out of her lover's mouth.

While she's released but four albums 16 years, Apple had slowly been bringing more orchestral flourishes to her music. Her last effort, 2005's *Extraordinary Machine*, is downright lush compared to the instrumental nakedness on *The Idler Wheel...*, in many ways a collaboration with multi-instrumentalist/producer Charley Drayton, a member of Keith Richards' side-project X-pensive Winos. Here, the two fashion a groove out of what sounds like a fight in the kitchen in "Anything We Want," and when Apple sings of wrestling with her brain in "Every Single Night," the song mirrors that tug-o-war, alternating between lullaby chimes and tribal pounding.

And what a head-trip of a battle this album constitutes. Sharks rip the vocalist half in "Werewolf," and an ex becomes the captain of a capsized ship in "Jonathan." So vivid is Apple's use of metaphor that when she sings of Coney Island in the latter tune, the moment proves striking. While the neighborhood brings to mind fanciful images of a bygone era, it's the rare lyric that references something tangible and real, a place that actually exists outside the minefield of her mind. —**Todd Martens**

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# Hangin' with Herbie Hancock

By Bailey S. Barnard Photos by Jeff Dorgay

It's a sunny Thursday in May. After having arrived eagerly early at the home of one of music's most influential living artists, *TONEAudio* publisher Jeff Dorgay and I bide our time at a nearby coffee shop. We head back to the two-story house, which seems understated compared to the rest of the neighborhood, located just north of Sunset Boulevard in Beverly Hills. Someone buzzes the gate open for us. As we both notice the SmartCar in the driveway, we enter what appears to be the side door and walk up the stairs to the media room, where a giant Sony 4K digital video projector is affixed to the ceiling. A Stewart Filmscreen hangs from the wall before it. Gold and platinum records adorn the adjacent wall.



Herbie Hancock enters the room. When I break the ice and tell him we were just admiring his collection, he says we should look at his awards case downstairs before we leave. Jeff comments that Pat Metheny once told him that his parents didn't take him seriously until he received his sixth Grammy. Hancock laughs in mild dismay.

"Look," he says. "For my folks, when they saw me on television—which was before I joined Miles Davis' band, which was in 1963—that was all it took."

In the time since, Hancock has accumulated an extensive laundry list of accomplishments, both in the world of music and beyond. He has recorded more than 50 live and studio albums since making his debut with *Takin' Off* in 1962 at the age of just 22. Soon after, Davis brought him onboard to play piano with his famous quintet, and there, Hancock remained for five years, during which time he helped forge jazz fusion with such efforts as *Bitches Brew*. Several years later, his 1973 masterwork *Head Hunters* became the first jazz record to ever go platinum. Over his five-decade career, he has received 14 Grammys and an Oscar, which he won for his score to the 1986 film *'Round Midnight*, plus five MTV Awards and seven honorary doctorates. Few living artists have made such an impact on contemporary music. *(continued)*

Today, at 72, Hancock remains highly active in a number of music-related philanthropies. His roles include serving as the Los Angeles Philharmonic's Creative Chair For Jazz, the Institute Chairman of the Thelonious Monk Institute of Jazz, and a UNESCO Goodwill Ambassador. He continues to tour and record with some of the world's most talented musicians. Paying his success forward, Hancock is also responsible for bringing new talents to the forefront of jazz. In 1980, he produced trumpeter Wynton Marsalis' debut.

**“Pat was still a teenager,” Hancock recalls. “A friend of mine I called Mr. Kansas City told me, ‘You’ve got to go see this young musician, Pat—he’s a great guitar player.’ We walk in the door and there’s this guitar player. He’s sitting there and he looks up at me—and his mouth falls open. Now look who Pat Metheny is today.”**

About 10 years earlier, he met a young guitarist named Pat Metheny in Kansas City.

“Pat was still a teenager,” Hancock recalls. “He was working in this house with a band. A friend of mine I called Mr. Kansas City told me, ‘You’ve got to go see this young musician, Pat—he’s a great guitar player.’ So I go over there with him. We walk in the door and there’s this guitar player. He’s sitting there and he looks up at me—and his mouth falls open. Now look who Pat Metheny is today.”

Metheny is just one of Hancock's many accomplices. (The two recorded and toured together for the 1990 album *Parallel Realities*, along with drummer Jack

DeJohnette.) During the last 50 years, Hancock has played with anyone who is anyone in the jazz world, as well as some of today's most talented pop stars. He pauses as something on the wall catches his eye.

“You know what?” he says, walking over to it. “I hadn't seen this. This is the gold record for *The Imagine Project*. This just came while I was gone. I'm seeing it for the first time right here.”

The 2010 album *The Imagine Project* finds Hancock collaborating with a diverse group of musicians, including Pink, John Legend, Jeff Beck, Wayne Shorter, and Chaka Khan. The release, which received a Grammy for Best Pop Collaboration with Vocals, sold more than 500,000 copies. The subsequent framed gold record and award certificate arrived during Hancock's recent trip to China, where he was working with Chinese piano virtuoso Lang Lang.

“We're doing a record together,” Hancock says. “I'm kind of co-producing it and involved with putting the team together. He sees these superstars like Lady Gaga and Justin Timberlake, and he wants that, because he [doesn't have] tunnel vision about classical music. If you want to do a crossover record, you have to be involved with a whole new process. It's complicated and takes a lot of time. For me to make those crossover records, it takes at least a couple years.”

Hancock is quick to recall the considerable popularity Lang Lang gained in China, noting that he has over seven million followers on the Chinese version of Twitter.

“It's called Weibo. This guy on a plane ride over there hooked me up with it. I signed up for it about five weeks ago and I've already got 41,000 followers.”

Jeff mentions the fact that rapper and actor Ice-T's two dogs, Spartacus and Maximus, have almost 40,000 followers on Twitter. Hancock gets a kick out of that and admits he only has 28,000. When asked what role technology products by the likes of Apple play in his everyday life, Hancock smiles.

“It's more like, what role doesn't it play?” he says. “I got all the iPhones on the first day they came out. I got all the iPads on the first day they came out. But with all those things, I don't know how artists can manage a career and find time to Tweet constantly. Most of them are a lot younger than I am and it's part of their lifestyle. But ever since this Weibo experience, I started doing it fairly recently myself on Twitter. I'm seeing now that this draws attention to the brand. But I've always been the guy who likes to be the first adopter. I got my first computer in 1979. It was an Apple II Plus—because it had 48K, rather than 32K, of memory.”



Hancock is proud of his newest toy, Sony's \$25,000 VPL-VW1000ES digital video projector, which offers a 4K screen resolution. His film career began in 1966, when he recorded the soundtrack for Italian director Michelangelo Antonioni's *Blowup*. He has recorded numerous other soundtracks since, and remains an ardent cinephile. (Hence, the top-notch projector.) He presses a button on a remote control to retract the film screen and reveal drawers and drawers of DVDs and Blu-rays. His SmartCar is another of his favorite playthings.

“I drive it everyday,” he says. “But inside the garage there's a Ferrari F355 that I bought it in 1996. When I got the SmartCar, I didn't drive that for about a year.”

While Hancock finds useful the new technologies in his everyday life, the relationship between his

music and technology isn't necessarily symbiotic.

“As much as I love technology, I don't want technology to control me. It's very important that the technology isn't what drives you. You have to be in the driver's seat. You have to be the pilot of your life.”

Jeff asks him how he's remained relevant for all these years.

“I'm always trying to reinvent myself,” Hancock replies, “except I don't really look at it that way. From my perspective, it's me wondering if what I have is put with something I don't actually have, could the two things make a third thing. Basically, that's led me to expanding my palette and the more I have in my palette, the more I have to choose from. And that just helps you open doors along the way.” (continued)

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FEATURE



Spirituality has also fueled the development of his music.

"I began practicing Buddhism in 1972," Hancock continues. "Around that time, I was really getting tired of playing that avant-garde music. I was feeling restless and feeling the need to be more tethered to the earth instead of just floating off in space. I mean, it was great. When it worked, it was unbelievable. When it didn't, it was like noise and irritating, and I was tired of that. It was though Buddhist chanting that I realized that I didn't want to do that anymore. I had been listening to Sly Stone and James Brown, and the idea of doing something kind of funky came to me—and that led to *Head Hunters*."

As if on cue, Hancock points out the aforementioned award case as we prepare to depart.

"You know," he adds, "people keep asking me how I'm still able to be viable at 72 years of age."

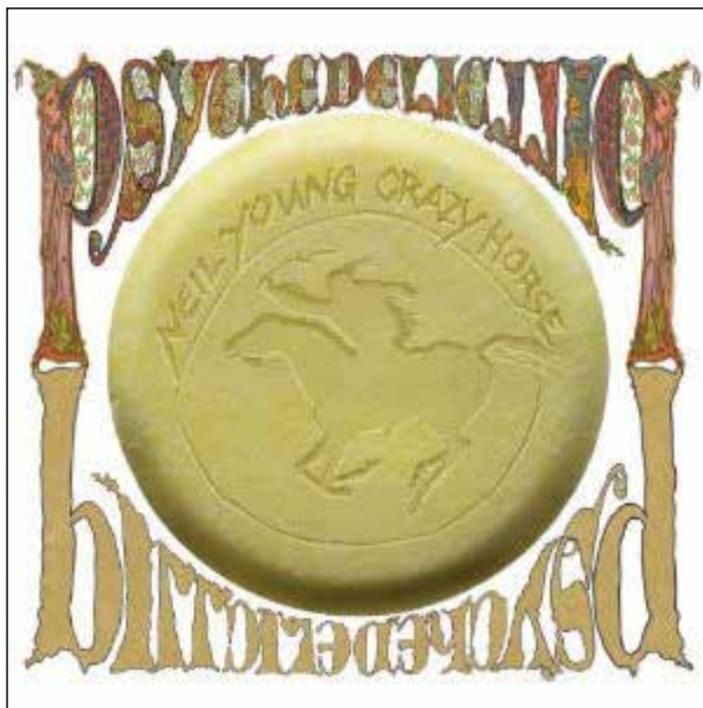
I love people and being able to share something with another human being is a priceless treasure. I learn from those experiences, because I'm always curious about stuff. That's how I've been shaping my life: combining my jazz roots with other forms of music. But for me, it all depends on my own determination and on my heart. Especially as a Buddhist, whatever I do for the greater good, that's what I'm always looking for. The most important thing is where I'm coming from. Me getting Album of the Year [for *River: The Joni Letters*] in 2008: What were the chances of that happening? They said the same thing every time I've had a record on the charts. It was like impossible, but it happened. I just continue to chant and continue to be open, so I can hopefully continue to maintain a youthful spirit. That's what it's all about." ●

[www.herbiehancock.com](http://www.herbiehancock.com)

**"You know," he adds, "people keep asking me how I'm still able to be viable at 72 years of age. I love people and being able to share something with another human being is a priceless treasure."**

**N**eil Young and Crazy Horse's first new studio album of original material in nine years gives a symbolic middle finger to modern convention.

Its length is sprawling, its surrealist first song occupies more than 27 minutes of time, and its lyrical content casts aspersions on the present and embraces the past. It is the opposite of the digestible sound-byte fare dominant on the very FM radio band that once championed Young. It is a stubborn and curmudgeonly statement in no hurry to go anywhere, and feels nary an obligation to apologize for its imperfections. It is the unmistakable sound of an artist doing things on his own terms and caring not an iota if he doesn't make everyone happy. It is noisy, raw, loose, off-the-cuff, spontaneous, and blatantly out of step with what's often perceived as progress. It is alternatively indulgent and lean, nostalgic and contemporary, humorous and serious, unscripted and planned, frustrating and engaging, simple and complex. It is everything one might expect a get-back-into-the-shed Crazy Horse record should be, and then some, and is likely to irritate the listeners that doubt the performance abilities of Young's longtime garage-rock mates.



### Neil Young and Crazy Horse

*Psychedelic Pill*

Warner Bros., 180g 3LP or CD

Approached on its own terms, *Psychedelic Pill* is also another master stroke from an icon who, nearing 67 years old, could sleepwalk through the remainder of his career rather than continue to take bold risks and potentially antagonize—even alienate. But Young has never been about playing it straight, and of late, whether on record or in print, he's rarely seemed more fiery or outspoken.

"When you hear my song now/You only get five percent/You used to get it all," Young laments on the opening "Driftin' Back," an aptly titled epic that nods in and out akin to a fever dream, and whose reflective themes resonate throughout the album. Coming on like a sonic tour of the Old West before settlement tamed the lands, the arrangement revels in spaciousness, with Crazy Horse's natural give and take contributing to a meditative vibe. Slow, droning exchanges occasionally threaten to stop, almost daring the listener to continue on the journey. Young's lyrics appear as if developed on the spot, as the tape rolls. The relaxed pace functions as a hallucinogenic, a drug conducive to Young what comes to his mind—just as if he were sitting on a couch in a shrink's office.

Conversational rhetoric in the form of recollections, comparisons, and memories consumes

*Psychedelic Pill*, in myriad ways the sonic accompaniment to Young's *Waging Heavy Peace*, a nonlinear autobiography/confessional tome as honest, freeform, creative, and unpredictable as any music book since Bob Dylan's *Chronicles Volume I*. Having initially mentioned the idea in "Drifting Back," Young returns to addressing his "inner rage" on the personal "Born In Ontario," a country-tinged rambler during which organs double as fugue-like horns and the narrator searches for roots, grounding, and understanding amidst perpetual change. Such elements have forever consumed Young, and in his refusal to settle—as well as welcoming of old cohorts to create catchy, vibe-based, fireplace-warm rock n' roll—these topics are as vital as they were when he invoked them more than four decades ago on "Old Man."

Only now, Young is the old man, a fact he not only recognizes but confronts via traipsing through emotions, ghosts, accomplishments, and shortcomings. The punchy, clever, and concise "Twisted Road" pays homage to Bob Dylan, the Grateful Dead, and Roy Orbison, with Young mentioning all by name and crediting their staggering influence on his life. It's one of the many extensions on *Psychedelic Pill* of the excellent "Days That Used to Be," a paean to bygone times and pals Young

and Crazy Horse cut on 1990's *Ragged Glory*. Yet, unlike so many records made during the last few years by aging artists in full-on look-back mode, *Psychedelic Pill* never preaches, offers grand pronouncements, elicits cheap sympathy, or lectures through rose-colored glasses. Rather, Young's chemistry with Crazy Horse arrests the senses. The foursome anticipates each other's moves, responding to nuanced details and stoking mesmerizing grooves with guidance provided by what Young deems in *Waging Heavy Peace* as "the Spirit."

Such interactions, and the quartet's 43 years of playing together, combine to drive "She's Always Dancing" to a point where chords and harmonies conjure out-of-body experiences. The song is automatic, easygoing, liberated—the mental and physical states of the protagonist. Young also burrows into the minds of a longtime husband and wife on "Ramada Inn," a loping relationship tale whose developments, fates, and circumstances resonate with nonfictional veracity. *(continued)*

**Young's chemistry with Crazy Horse arrests the senses. The foursome anticipates each other's moves, responding to nuanced details and stoking mesmerizing grooves with guidance provided by what Young deems in *Waging Heavy Peace* as "the Spirit."**

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**Humility, time fading away, and the acknowledgement of rust's refusal to sleep have rarely sounded so genuine and passionate.**

It's this compassion—and Young's optimist-realist belief that love still conquers all—that makes his songwriting profoundly human and his guitar playing—its subtle growls and fluid distortion underscoring tension and uncertainty—the ultimate complementary poetic device. Once again, Young is bent on finding out what answers and advice the past's glowing embers can lend to comprehending the present and future. What he discovers isn't always comforting.

"I used to walk like a giant on the land," boom Young and Co. on the closing "Walk Like a Giant," a storming tsunami that earns its mastodon-referencing name and immediately stakes its claim as the biggest-sounding track Young and the Horse recorded since "Like a Hurricane" (in many ways its sibling). A whistled melody and huge, ribeye-thick rhythmic footprint underpin the anthemic arrangement. Young's moaning, grumbling riffs and the Horse's wordless doo-wop-style backing vocals dance hand-in-hand. The guitar solos find Young in hunkered-down position, bent over his instrument. Yet the ragged-and-torn condition of his vocals register equal impact.

"Think about how close we came," he bellows, contemplating he and his friends' hippie dream to save the world and now, recognizing their diminished place in it. Humility, time fading away, and the acknowledgement of rust's refusal to sleep have rarely sounded so genuine and passionate. —**Bob Gendron**

**G**reen Day fans may have seen this moment coming.

In the mid 90s, the trio cut a version of the Kinks' "Tired of Waiting for You." It was a B-side, originally found on the single for "Basket Case," one of the band's breakthrough hits from 1994's *Dookie*. An early single by the Kinks, the song captured the mix of longing, frustration, and boredom that Green Day so colorfully wrote about early in its career.

The Kinks' Davies brothers, however, were downright polite compared to Green Day's vocalist/guitarist Billie Joe Armstrong. The latter's lyrics, after all, cut quickly to the point ("When masturbation's lost its fun, you're...lonely"). But "Tired of Waiting" claims an underlying stop-dragging-me-around edge; its embrace by a bunch of snotty, suburban punks weaned on the Ramones and Screeching Weasel wasn't that crazy.



### Green Day

*¡Uno!*  
Reprise Records, LP or CD

Green Day handled the song with reverence, taking it slow and singing it as elegantly as possible. It was also a bit of a message to Green Day followers: Someday, the band's three members seemed to be saying, we will be taking ourselves seriously. *¡Uno!* is Green Day's search for pop perfection, the sound of a band attempting—and failing on each and every track—to nail the pop sensibility of "Tired of Waiting for You."

Vide, the stop-and-start guitars of "Oh Love," as well as Armstrong's "heart on a noose" lyrics, are pretty much Top 40 pop-rock by the numbers. The suicide imagery is standard-issue false poetics, and it keeps the song on the line between anonymous and honest that everyone from Matchbox 20 to Justin Bieber so expertly walks. Likewise, "Nuclear Family"

is less about the changing face of the American suburbs and more an excuse for Armstrong to say he's going to "detonate," with the singer even going so far as to end the song in a "10, 9, 8, 7..." countdown. (Just imagine counting along in concert. Maybe it's fun.) Later on "Loss of Control," Armstrong at least admits his age, singing, "I'd rather go to a funeral than to this high-school reunion." Still, the lyric isn't funny or clever, just rather selfish (have you been to a funeral recently, Billie?).

Everything else aside, what really makes *¡Uno!* such a disaster isn't simply the fact that it's a rather boring pop record. No, what makes *¡Uno!* a disaster is simply the fact that this is the record Green Day opted to make in 2012. This isn't the first time Green Day took itself seriously. That occurred on 2004's *American Idiot*, and it was cause for rejoice. The increasingly midtempo throwaway pop songs on albums like 2000's *Warning* got jettisoned in favor of multi-part punk-rock suites that took aim at the year's political regime.

Green Day had stopped mimicking Brit-punk forebears the Clash in sound only. With *American Idiot*, and to a lesser extent with 2009's *21st Century Breakdown*, Green Day suddenly was a band willing to wrestle with current events. The closest Green Day gets to acknowledging America in 2012 is on "Kill the DJ," a confusingly violent song that places images of torture alongside present-day rave culture, all while sounding exactly like the Clash's stab at the punk-meets-disco of "Magnificent Seven."

When Green Day revealed it would release three albums between late 2012 and early 2013, right in the midst of America's election cycle, there was reason for excitement. Sure, no doubt there'd be filler. But

Green Day appeared to be taking its role as rock n' roll chroniclers of the news quite earnestly. Then came the Green Day-branded version of Angry Birds.

And then came Armstrong's mid-September meltdown at a Clear Channel festival in Las Vegas, which found Green Day sandwiched between Usher and Rihanna. When the band was given a shorter set than anticipated, Armstrong flipped. The swear words are omitted, but here's an example of his dialogue: "I've been around since...1980... 8 and you're going to give me one...minute? You gotta be...kidding me...I'm not...Justin Bieber."

Soon after came reports of Armstrong's struggles with substance abuse. It isn't making light of addiction to note Armstrong's onstage flip-out contains more fire, more humor, and more personality than anything on *¡Uno!*. Having listened to these 12 songs more than a dozen times each, I'm at a loss at being able to tell them apart, or find anything to compliment. "Let Yourself Go," perhaps, will sound fun at time-outs during NBA games, if that's the effect the band intended.

*¡Uno!* is simply rather ordinary. That's a shame, as *American Idiot*, and even *21st Century Breakdown*, are fights against all things bland and simple. Yet the bigger issue here is that Green Day suddenly seems to be at an identity crisis. Gone is the social commentary of its recent work, and in its place a collection of rock songs that, quite frankly, sound OK sandwiched between Usher and Rihanna. Armstrong's right, obviously. He is not Justin Bieber. So perhaps he should stop trying to compete with Bieber's contemporaries.

—Todd Martens

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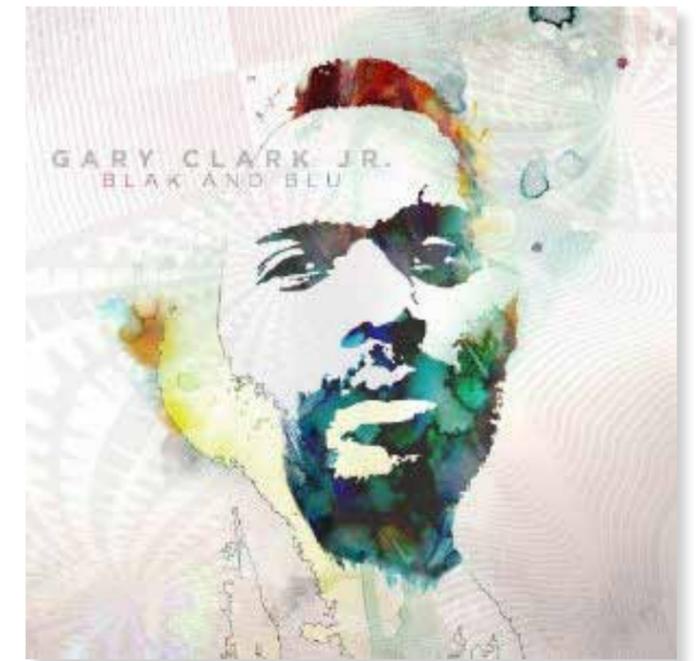
“I don't believe in competition/Ain't no one else like me around,” announces Gary Clark Jr., kicking off his major-label debut with one of the more brazen opening lines in memory. It's not unusual to hear rap MCs or veteran musicians spout boldly confident remarks. And, given Clark is a newcomer, a little showmanship doesn't hurt—entertainment has always involved some chivalrous fanfaronade. But when the boasting isn't supported, the strategy backfires and the curtain pulled back, leading to frustration and disappointment.

Clark, however, backs up his oversized claim on a majority of *Blak & Blu*, routinely justifying recent praise from established stars (Jay-Z, Alicia Keys) and demonstrating that tireless touring—the 28-year-old appeared at practically every major North American music festival during the past 15 months—further honed his skills. The album will doubtlessly trigger myriad assertions crowning the Austin-based artist as the long-hoped-for rescuer of the blues. To be sure, Clark's fuzz-drenched guitar playing more than lives up to the prerequisites. Yet any such proclamations will sell him short. He speaks languages beyond the blues, and whether fairly or not, the genre remains associated with the past. *Blak & Blu* is modern, and in certain places, futuristic.

The most obvious, convincing example of Clark's forward-looking albeit roots-mindful approach develops during an inventive interpretation of Jimi Hendrix's “Third Stone From the Sun.” He blends chicken-scratch riffs with turntable scratching all the while maximizing the guitar's tonal decay, riding out single notes as a surfer does a giant wave until reaching the coda, when he turns and burns with searing lines. Here, and throughout a majority of the set, his gritty, muscular distortion works in tandem with a pristine command of space and tempo.

He splatters Delta mud on the steam-driven “When My Train Pulls In,” calling on wordless gospel refrains and percussive tambourines to flesh out the arrangement. His electrifying six strings howl like a buzzsaw during “Bright Lights,” a hypnotic song girded by ride cymbals and funky, get-down rhythms. When the star-making track concludes, diesel and dust are all that remain. Clark's wall-of-sound droning scales even higher peaks on “Numb.” At one with a sea-sawing groove, Clark spits out notes as if he were shooting nails from a gun, and still, remains aware of the blazing organ in the background, another instrument alongside with which he maneuvers and twists.

Indeed, Clark seems eager to prove he's comfortable with any diverse setting thrown his way, an ambition that ultimately stalls momentum and causes the otherwise impressive record to run about 20 minutes and four tunes too long. He's at home fronting the equivalent of a swaggering, horn-stoked R&B band on “Ain't Messin' Around,” serving notice with a take-on-all-comers guitar solo and smartly allowing the song to boil down to its basics before revving up for a head-long finish.



**Gary Clark Jr.**  
*Blak & Blu*  
Warner Bros., CD

Attempts at inhabiting the roles of a sensitive soulful crooner are less credible. The issues haven't anything to do with Clark's smooth, appealing vocals; they relate to the material and execution. On the title track, hip-hop beats and strings qualify as contemporary, but Clark sounds like he's reaching—and just another retro-flavored artist, not someone brimming with originality, personality, and flair. Vide, the unpersuasive “The Life,” which belongs on a Bruno Mars album, and forced air of “Things Are Changin'.”

Whether the idea of the label, a manager, or Clark himself, these crossover moves signal interruptions in focus. Fortunately, they're brief, and don't call into question any identity issues. “You gonna know my name by the end of the night,” the singer declares on “Bright Lights,” giving anyone within earshot damn good reasons they should. —**Bob Gendron**



**Aimee Mann**  
*Charmer*  
 Superego Records, LP or CD



**Corin Tucker Band**  
*Kill My Blues*  
 Kill Rock Stars, LP or CD

**T**here's plenty of trouble in these two records. It's there on Corin Tucker Band's "Neskowin," where the dressed-to-impressed teenage girls brag that they enjoy "other toys, other faculties," and it shows up again on Aimee Mann's "Gumby," via a father with questionable intentions who gets chastised by Mann. "Don't call me," she sings, "call your daughter." Adolescence, it seems, never truly gets old.

The connections between veteran artists Mann and Tucker aren't direct. Both have guested on IFC's "Portlandia," which stars Tucker's Sleater-Kinney bandmate Carrie Brownstein. But that's about it. Musically, these days, Mann favors calm, cool, and curt, playing the role of a storyteller with a last line that lingers long after it's sung. Tucker still prefers it loud, with lyrics shouted and experimentation pertaining to a bluesier variety.



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If the songs on these respective albums, each one essentially a character study, were turned into independent films, Mann's would be patient, with sharp dialogue and awkward pauses, whereas Tucker's would boast crude, documentary-like cuts. Yet it's rare to find two records with such grown-up perspectives, each a reflection on lessons learned from a vantage point that no longer has room for idealism.

Tucker immediately sings of aspirations she left in a drawer, daydreaming of the woman president who has yet to be elected in "Groundhog Day." Later, in "Joey," she wonders what happened to an old flame now that she and him are both grown up. The two cuts represent some of the slower offerings on *Kill My Blues*, but they're each tightly wound, with basement-heavy drums and melodic riffs countered with spindly webs of guitar notes.

On "Outgoing Message," connections are missed amidst gleaming keyboards, and the same instrument creates something far more troubling—and almost foreign—between the stops and starts of "Constance." The tune nearly veers into 60s psychedelics save for Tucker's self-assured guitar kicking it back into more familiar punk-rock territory, leaving only the uncomfortable imagery of an empty house in its wake.

Teenage girls are referenced numerous times throughout *Kill My Blues*, be it the windows-down, bang-up rock n' roll groove of "Neskowin" or wicked-witch intro of "None Like You," where Tucker goes so far as to sing, "come gather children."

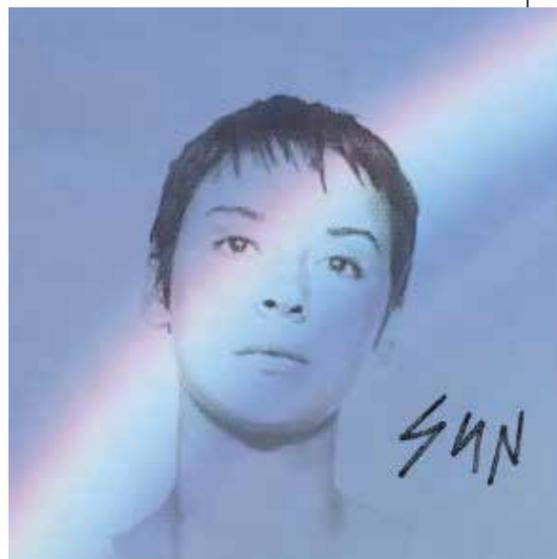
It soon gets less weird, thanks in part to the blast of guitars and sing-along "ba-bas." Still, throughout this song and the album, one senses Tucker is directing these songs toward someone younger.

The same feeling permeates each and every track of Mann's *Charmer*, which possesses a cleaner, more midtempo vibe—but no less of a thought-provoking center. The title track arrives as one of the friskiest songs, and Mann lays out her thesis here, noting that "secretly, charmers feel like they're frauds." One song later, she gets to the heart of the matter. "I've joined the cue of people dead to you," she confesses in "Disappeared," wondering over echoing guitars how she lost a long-time friend.

Mann has more fun over the spacey synths, jingle-jangle cymbals, and "woo-woos" of "Crazytown," the title of which stands for the place of residence for most of the women her male friends keep chasing. But hopefully, her single friends will hear "Living a Lie," a guitar-buzzing duet with the Shins' James Mercer in which the lives of those coupled-up are far more lonely than those of folks on their own.

With all this adult anxiety around, it's no wonder that each artist simply cuts loose at one point. Mann gives into studio effects on the catchy, sci-fi warfare of "Gamma Ray," and Tucker writes a kiss-off to the ghost of her past in "No Bad News Tonight," an old-fashioned two-minute jam on which she just wants everyone to stop over-thinking. Talk about a life lesson worth trying to remember.

—**Todd Martens**



### Cat Power

*Sun*  
Matador, 2LP or CD

**W**hile it's only been six years since Cat Power, a.k.a. Chan Marshall, released her last album of original material, *The Greatest*, it sounds like well over 60 years have passed. For the aforementioned effort, Marshall recruited musicians Leroy "Flick" Hodges and Mabon "Teenie" Hodges—the brothers who helped define Al Green's Hi Records sound back in the early 1970s—and set out for Memphis' Ardent Studios to record a warm, lush album steeped in vintage soul.

With *Sun*, the singer emerges from her time capsule and turns out an effort that sounds wholly modern, awash in bright, shimmering synths and stuttering drum machines. Indeed, it wouldn't be a surprise to hear rappers like Kanye West or Lil' Wayne spitting over a handful of these backing tracks on some future mixtape, which Marshall actually attempts on the closing "Peace and Love." She rhymes, "100,000 hits on the Internet/But that don't mean sheeit," stretching out that final word like an indie-rock Clay Davis. It's a bold change of direction for Marshall, whose fragile, insular reputation (for years, her onstage meltdowns were depressingly standard fare) is miles removed from the music here.

The idea of brushing aside the past repeatedly surfaces throughout the album. On "3, 6, 9," a snappy tune built around strutting piano and layered, auto-tuned (!) vocals, she sings of shaking the "monkey from her back." Then, on "Human Being," a kinetic number driven by plucked acoustic guitar and shuffling drums, Marshall lays out what could be the record's central thesis, singing, "We all got rules we all have to break." And if this means auto-tuning her honeyed,

cashmere sweater of a voice, well then, so be it. Moreover, while past efforts are generally sparse, *Sun* is often dense and layered—even the vocals. At times, it sounds like a choir of Marshalls trade verses.

Highlights are numerous. Despite its title, the robotic "Silent Machine" is arguably the noisiest track, building to a wild, clattering finish. The vaguely Middle Eastern-sounding "Always On My Own," by contrast, arrives as a low-key spiritual tinged with atmospheric electronics. Best of all, however, is "Nothing But Time," an 11-minute epic Marshall reportedly penned for the teenage daughter of an ex. Here, atop a steady trickle of piano, the singer doles out motherly advice ("Never give away your body/Never give away your friends/Never give away what you always wanted/Never ever give in") in a warm, hypnotic voice, coming across like the world's most engaging life coach.

"Your world is just beginning," she coos as the song unwinds. "It's up to you to be like nobody." Listening to *Sun*, it's safe to say Marshall has taken her own advice.  
—**Andy Downing**

**T**here's a simple question asked throughout the opening track on *Love This Giant*, the years-in-the-works collaboration between Talking Heads principal David Byrne and Annie Clark, whose work under the St. Vincent moniker is sometimes abrasive, sometimes gorgeous, but always guaranteed to be eccentric. "Who's this?" Byrne chirps, delivering the lyric with surprised whimsy. The setting, however, shouldn't be all that unfamiliar to Byrne.

Clark may be just shy of half of Byrne's 60 years, but from the opening moments of this album, her odd guitar parts—the instrument arrives with as much fanfare as the horn sections that dot most of the 12 tracks—are placed comfortably within the confines of a latter-day Byrne. This is equally exciting and disappointing. She has a knack for dirtying up what could have been epic Disney symphonies; he has the uncanny ability to make the most worldly and childish of sounds come across as grown-up museum pieces. *Love This Giant* is largely a stroll through Byrne's gallery of sounds, with Clark having as much fun as possible with all the new trinkets at her disposal.

"Weekend in the Dust" comes across as Clark leading a high-school marching band down a yellow brick road, and "Ice Age" finds Clark splicing and dicing her vocals and minor-key guitar work around the dusty, sputtering grooves of producer/rhythm ace John Congleton, Clark's longtime collaborator—and an artist whose beats regularly toe the line between real and programmed. Both accentuate, with wide-eyed musical wonderment, brass parts that spin round and round like old wooden tops.

Byrne's turns at lead are no less playful. "I Am an Ape" sounds concocted by an orchestra of toy-drumming monkeys, and "I

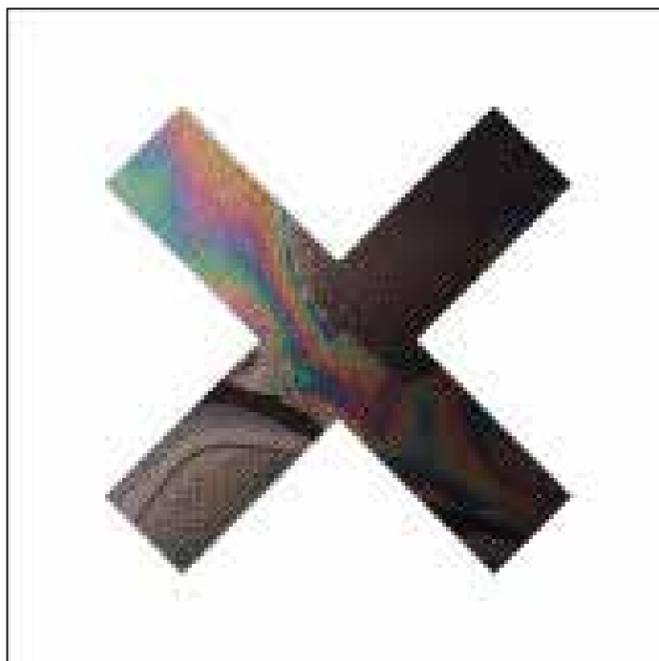


### David Byrne & St. Vincent

*Love This Giant*  
4AD/Todo Mundo, LP or CD

Should Watch TV" is a trumpet-driven panic attack seemingly about being out of step with popular culture. It's all quite a bit of fun, but also surprisingly cold, so much so that songs seem to have been cleaned with cans of pressurized air to ensure safe storage. That all makes sense, as Byrne's most recent release is a live album recorded at Carnegie Hall. *Love This Giant* is fit for such a setting. This is experimentation built for polite applause rather than aural transcendence. One is simply left wishing for Byrne to have dressed down a bit, as the most collaborative of songs—"Lazarus," for instance—truly cut loose.

Indeed, "Lazarus" may just be the best vocal performance of Clark's career. She's harmoniously pretty one second and aloofly distant the next. Byrne, meanwhile, seems to be gaining steam with each verse until he seems locked in a cat-and-mouse game with his trumpeters. It's no more or less joyous than the rest of the album, but for once, this rather formal party breaks a much-needed sweat. —**Todd Martens**

**The xx***Coexist*

Young Turks, LP or CD

**C**oexist, the second album from zealously minimalist U.K. act the xx, lists 11 songs, although it'd be easy to listen to this nearly 40-minute effort and mistake the whole collection as one extended piece of heady, existential relationship drama.

Members Romy Madley Croft and Oliver Sim are unlikely duet partners. Rarely, in fact, do they even sing together, or seem to display any signs that they are aware the other is present. "We used to be closer than this," the two sing on "Chains." She is breathy paranoia and Sim is vampire-broody. Beneath them, fractured minor-key guitars flirt with non-existence, and the tempo of the electronic rhythms seems to change on a whim.

A few years ago, the band's self-titled 2009 debut became an unlikely hit, thanks, in part, to one of the band's instrumentals scoring a ubiquitous commercial during the 2010 Winter Olympics. The xx's sleek electronics, as well as its mix of indie-rock guitars and R&B aching, gave it the feel of a modern soul record, one in the vein of Kanye West's *808s and Heartbreak*. Soon, the ensemble's producer, Jamie Smith, found himself working with the likes of Adele and Drake, and Rihanna was sampling the xx. How the band may respond to such sudden mainstream attention was the big question heading into *Coexist*.

©Photo by Jamie-James Medina



**Coexist doesn't change the formula so much as make it even starker.**

*Coexist* doesn't change the formula so much as make it even starker. Melodic production flourishes arise here and there, and when the beats surface on a song like "Swept Away," they're startling. They're there one second and gone the next, like a rhythmic game of Whac-A-Mole.

The xx doesn't need to say much, and its compositions toy with listener perceptions. That is, the songs highlight not what's missing but what's been extracted, ensuring they hold true to their emotional core. "Reunion" sounds concocted underwater, with the sounds of steel drums heard somewhere on the surface and off in the distance. "Try" is even more alien. The song's siren-like synths become a heartache distress call, and Croft croons to a slow-dance groove that's just out of her reach. The strongest moments linger long after they've past. "Chains" features a repeat refrain, and says little else in just fewer than 3 minutes. The result is devastating—the love song duet at its quietest, thoughtful, and lonely.

Hotshot remixers may view these pieces as dares, since they seek to amplify the melodies buried in the atmospheres. Yet that would do the songs of *Coexist* a disservice, as they're odes to how difficult it can be for two people to communicate—uncomfortable silences and all.

—Todd Martens



**Beth Orton**  
*Sugaring Season*  
Anti-, LP or CD

**B**eth Orton doesn't often release albums. *Sugaring Season* is her first since 2006, and only her fifth in 16 years. Yet when an Orton set appears, there's a solid chance it will be the kind of work listeners not only want to hear, but wouldn't mind living in.

*Sugaring Season* most certainly fits that bill. The 10-track effort clocks in at less than 40 minutes, yet still unfolds with the natural, engrossingly languid pace of an autumnal sunset. Don't, however, confuse that with being comforting.

Orton's voice is something otherworldly, a fluttering, animal-like object that seems to circle in and around the melody, treating the latter as a light bulb. It's not always possible to discern what she's singing on a song such as "Drawn Chorus," on which she hurries up and stops around orbiting strings. The approach can, perhaps, equate to a make or break proposition for some listeners, yet it better suits her mature sound.

For an artist who once split the difference between folk-pop and electronic beats, *Sugaring Season* sees Orton working with musicians accomplished in jazz. And it's here where she coasts around arrangements that feel increasingly freeform. The addition of strings and an orchestra can lead to devastatingly striking results. "Something More Beautiful" is the centerpiece in which verses are a slow-danced, acoustic-picked waltz, and the chorus captures grown-up emotional exhaustion. "When you feel too much," Orton sings, her voice suddenly crisply clear. Meanwhile, an electric guitar emerges from nowhere and violinists hit like dive-bombing vultures.

The electronic aspects of Orton's earlier career, too, are still evident—they've just been given an organic makeover. The beat in "Candles," for instance, sounds as if it could start a campfire, and "See Through Blue" uses a jolly, animated piano to etch out a spaced-out groove. Still, with song titles like "Magpie," "Call Me Breeze," and "Last Leaves of Autumn," one can't shake the sensation that this is music born in a cabin, and the songs destined for late-night reflection.

"Mystery," for instance, sounds almost Gaelic in its sparseness, and the song's patiently strummed guitar and long-drawn out violin notes seem to indicate Orton's mission. This is an artist exploring, rather than offering, answers.  
—**Todd Martens**

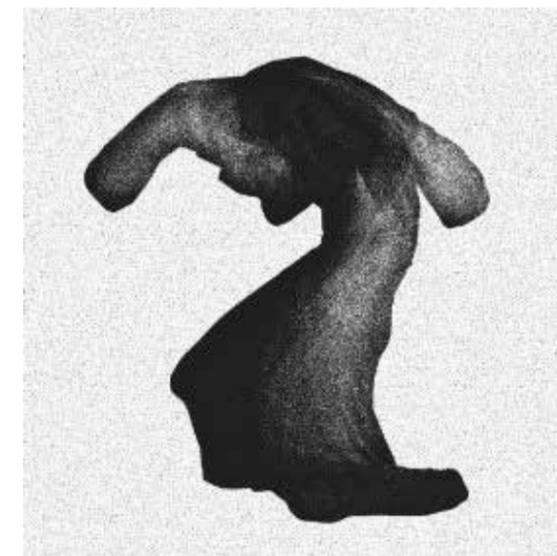
**I**f Darwin was still alive, it's reasonable to think he'd be studying Yeasayer instead of his beloved Galapagos Island finches. Evolution has been the lone constant for the Brooklyn-by-way-of-Baltimore trio since it first got together in 2007. The band's debut, *All Hour Cymbals*, flirts with art-damaged psychedelia, while its 2010 breakthrough conjures images of Tears for Fears via widescreen synthpop. Now, *Fragrant World* finds the band venturing further into the cosmos and experimenting with fragmented, futuristic R&B.

The songs are largely unstable, packed with jarring synthesizer textures, wobbly bass, and electronic drums that cut through the mix like railroad spikes driven into cold earth. Even the vocals are warped, distorted, and auto-tuned, sometimes coming on like Greek choruses of melodic androids.

Despite the alien sonic landscape, many songs are still rooted in human emotions. "Devil and the Deed" could pass for a millennial breakup tune, with guitarist Anand Wilder singing "I can't live without her" as the band locks into a dark, disco-etched groove. Similar themes surface in "Demon Road," a gurgling cut on which the mates fret about their romantic failures ("I've never been no good at bringing flowers") atop a gently throbbing backdrop of electronic blips and beeps.

Last time around, many of Yeasayer's songs sounded born of an inherent sense things would ultimately be okay. "Your lows will have their complements of highs" promised singer/keyboardist Chris Keating on "Ambling Alp." This time around, much of that optimism has dissolved. "I wish that I could tell you that it's all alright," sings Keating on weirdly hypnotic album closer "Glass of the Microscope." "But in truth we're doomed."

"Longevity," a fractured mash-up of tip-toeing synths and crumbling drums that could pass for



**Yeasayer**  
*Fragrant World*  
Secretly Canadian, 2LP or CD

a Timbaland production, is the closest the band comes to its old, feel-good self. "Live in the moment," sings Keating, "Never count on longevity." Well, alright then. At times, the band's digital soundscapes match this dire mood. "No Bones," for one, is cold and clinical, as though it somehow sprung to life completely untouched by human hands. Similar troubles mar "Reagan's Skelton," a soulless number that plays like an LCD Soundsystem throwaway.

Better is "Henrietta," a deeply weird, atmospheric tune that takes the true story of Henrietta Lacks (a 1951 cancer victim whose tumor cells were cultured to create cell lines for medical research) and spins it into a meditation on death and the after-life. "Oh Henrietta," Keating sings, his voice auto-tuned 'til it practically gleams. "We can live on forever." Or at least long enough, one would hope, for audiences to catch up with the band's futuristic ways. —**Andy Downing**

# Diamanda Galas

**Museum of Contemporary Art**

Chicago, Illinois

By Bob Gendron

“**D**ue to the intensity of the performance, the artist requests no intermittent noises (cell phones, candy wrappers, et al.)” It would be easy to deem this statement, printed and posted to each entry door of the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago at Diamanda Galas’ sold-out two-night stand at the facility, an example of the type of persnickety demands often accompanying musicians’ riders.



©Photo by Kristopher Buckle

Doing so, however, would be misguided. For few performers approach the frightening degrees of severity, concentration, and fervor Galas seemingly embraces as parts of her natural disposition.

Watching her sit at the piano, eyes staring ahead, hues of bruised red and purple lighting illuminating the sparse stage, can be a near-religious experience—a cathartic cleansing and intimate brush with emotional extremities that forces even the most devoted listener to question what the human voice can do, to what depths it can penetrate the soul, and just how much scourged history, limb-severing pain, and tragic redemption it can convey without collapsing in a heap.

And so it went in late February during the second of two Galas concerts in the modern museum’s hall, rare appearances coinciding with the exhibition “This Will Have Been: Art, Love & Politics in the 1980s,” to which the pioneering California native lent several works. The daughter of Greek and Anatolian parents, Galas has always been more popular and

respected overseas, traits reflective of the international community’s headier interest in avant-garde and bold creativity. Unconcerned with the mainstream, she’s devoted her career to difficult subject matter and inventive interpretation. Topics such as AIDS, dementia, genocide, injustice, torture, depression, and isolation inform her compositions. Akin to her intrepid songs, Galas’ three-and-a-half octave vocal range remains a distinctive weapon capable of dividing audiences and eliciting disbelief.

Indeed, the opera-trained singer’s voice defied limitations throughout the brilliant 75-minute set by alternately weeping, wailing, cackling, shrieking, screaming, howling, moaning, trilling, sighing, and hissing. It often appeared as if Galas spoke in tongues, digging for and finding crevasses between words, syllables, and pauses. She channeled phrases in Italian, English, Greek, and German, contributing an exotic vibe and sense of entrenched empathy for the narrative subjects. Her program, “Were You There When

They Crucified My Lord?” drew from *Masque of the Red Death Trilogy* as well as several jolting newer works.

Dramatic silences punctuated “The Cats Will Know,” a suicide poem by Cesare Pavese that Galas set to music, her bel canto deliveries and diving vibrato reinforcing tragic sympathy. She inhabited multiple personalities for a reading of Ferdinand Freiligrath’s devotional “Der Stunde Kommt (The Hour Will Come),” Marlene Dietrich’s favorite text and, in Galas’ hands, a sentimentally melancholy tune that inspired her to terrifying heights. Her throaty nasal timbre and uncoiling of complex frequencies recalled the quick-strike actions of a serpent before the piece ended in a muted, funereal close.

Confrontational moments abounded. Roy Acuff’s standard “Were You There When They Crucified My Lord” began in heavy barrelhouse form and evoked rowdy New Orleans tradition before Galas let loose with challenging snarls, rolling her fingers over piano keys until they literally vibrated. (*continued*)

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CONCERT

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She then punctuated the dramatic presentation with a repeated series of siren-blast vocal highs that threatened to shatter eardrums. For "Let's Not Chat About Despair," Galas embraced sarcasm and a curdled-milk tone, slamming her right hand down on the 88s, the display echoing with savvy edginess and pouncing blues.

She proved just as convincing and compelling when taking a mellower approach. "In Despair," regarding the abandonment of a gay lover, touched on balladic structures, an aural soliloquy that amidst certain passages bordered on a lullaby one might croon to a child. During a pleading version of the gospel spiritual "Be Sure That My Grave Is Kept Clean," Galas' handclaps mimicked the sound of a coffin lid. For all her seriousness, the 56-year-old experimentalist revealed

a humorous side by bantering with the crowd and admitting her music was ugly, and that it wasn't going to change. Not that it, or she, should. Equal to her chilling take on Ralph Stanley's "Oh Death"—on which her singing seemed to emanate from underground as she whipped mournful verses into tornadic fury—a determined "Let My People Go" combined striking imagery and vocal exorcism. An angry cry for salvation that pit god against the devil, and mortality against life, its outcome and appearance were as dark, unnerving, sinister, and provocative as Galas herself. ●



©Photo by Pamela Littky

**Divine Fits**

*A Thing Called Divine Fits*  
Merge Records, LP or CD

**W**hen Divine Fits title a love song “My Love is Real,” it’s not really a love song at all. Oh, it sounds like a love song, all right. There’s a synthetic, handclap-friendly groove, references to being nervous, and disco flashes of groovy, colorful keyboards.

But Dan Boeckner signals his—and pretty much the band’s intentions—each time he delivers (pants, rather) the chorus. “My love is real,” sings Boeckner, delivering the line as if he’s between steps on a treadmill, “until it’s not.” And bam! There’s the band-aid, ripped right off, without warning. The Divine Fits are pop music, but pop music at its most abrupt.

The band is also an indie supergroup, at least if you travel in such circles as the Pitchfork Music Festival. Led by Boeckner and Britt Daniel upfront, Divine Fits is vocally (and on guitar/bass), part Wolf Parade/Handsome Furs and part Spoon. On drums is Sam Brown of punk act New Bomb Turks, and, relax, that’s as much of a history lesson as this review will give.

Just know that the band looks as it sounds. At a recent Los Angeles gig, Daniel and Boeckner essentially came onstage wearing ratty undershirts and tank tops.

Built too wiry thin to be toughs, they looked the type too happily shut-in to be concerned with fashion, and who count a night spent searching through record crates as socializing. Near show’s end, Divine Fits tackled Tom Petty & the Heartbreakers’ “You Got Lucky,” and the song’s stalker-cold keyboard, guitar release, and sawed-off vocals essentially served as a mission statement.

Yes, the keyboards of Alex Fischel give Divine Fits a vintage, 70s yesteryear feel, a sense of

time and place otherwise proudly lacking in the sparse, modernist arrangements. The shell of this 11-track album is barren, emotionless at times, but *A Thing Called Divine Fits* succeeds as a record of moments rather than a collective whole. Look past the folded arms, and each track has reasons to return. They’re there in the call-and-response bass of “What Gets You Alone,” which gets increasingly close to convulsing the song into a heart attack as it progresses, as well as the neon keyboard hum of “Baby

Get Worse,” which seems to stop the tune just short of the glorious chorus Boeckner and Daniel torturously deny it.

Edges win out over smoothness. The panicked clicks and warm guitars of “For Your Heart,” for instance, or the percussive wind-ups of “Flaggin A Ride.” And desserts, such as in “Like Ice Cream,” aren’t treats, but hearts with which to be toyed. But the band revels in games, treating the songs as lean little puzzles, and letting the listener fill in the gaps. —**Todd Martens**



### Taylor Swift

*Red*  
Big Machine, 2LP or CD

**T**he number of artists that could actually get away with having their face plastered on a pizza delivery box is rather small. It has to be the type of artist regularly described with the word “brand,” and whose new albums are treated with marketing onslaught that regularly greets films with such as words as “Avengers” or “Dark Knight” in the title.

With the release of *Red*, Taylor Swift has confirmed what many have suspected for a long while. She is not a country artist but a pop brand, one whose new work can be delivered to your door via a nationwide pizza chain (this is true) and whose collaborators are discussed as frequently as her sound. Perhaps more, as *Red* sees Swift working with ace songwriters such as Max Martin (Britney Spears, Kelly Clarkson), Butch Walker (Avril Lavigne, Pink), and Dan Wilson (Weezer, Dixie Chicks).

At the recent broadcast of the Country Music Association Awards, Swift even seemed out of place. The sound of new album *Red*, her fourth, is as Nashville as Carly Rae Jepsen’s ubiquitous hit “Call Me Maybe.” In fact, while listening to the record, I seriously often thought my iTunes skipped to Jepsen, especially on the bubbly stop-and-start chorus of “22.”

Having sold more than one-million copies of the effort in its first week of release, Swift has cemented her status as a Lady Gaga-level pop star. That said, some moments on *Red* are irresistibly catchy. Opening track “State of Grace,” for instance, sees Swift rocking with the type of session musicians that can channel U2 with the snap of a finger. “Stay Stay Stay,” meanwhile, dials things down for a cutesy indie-pop ditty that feels comprised of all the best parts of Apple’s iPod commercials.

On *Red*, there’s a Swift for every occasion. “I Knew You Were Trouble” goes from jangly acoustics to current, Skrillex-influenced dancefloor trends. It’s not a full-on electro-pop number; still, enough rave culture is thrown in to ensure Swift will get remixed by the DJ at the local club. And just to show that she hasn’t forgotten her roots, there are teenage-dream ballads such as “Begin Again.”

In the same way, perhaps, that rock bands such as Radiohead and Wilco are likely too ambitious and too talented to make a train wreck of an album,

enough money and back-end production back Swift to at least guarantee more than a few pop hits per album. Her general likeability—she’s sort of a grown-up Tinkerbell—and sly nods to indie records that are “cooler” than hers via tunes such as “We Are Never Ever Getting Back Together” make her the rare star that sells wholesomeness and bashfulness.

But at 16 songs and more than 64 minutes in length, *Red* overstays its welcome. Rom-com collaborations with puppy-dog British vocalists such as Ed Sheeran and Gary Lightbody need to go, and the album suffers from a general lack of direction. As a songwriter, Swift’s strength is in her approachability. She has, for instance, a deft ability to write anonymously detailed lyrics. We all, for example, know the “little kid with glasses in a twin-size bed” in the Shania Twain rocker “All Too Well.”

For that reason alone, *Red* will make a lot of people happy. Her record company, many of her fans, her collaborators, and no doubt Swift herself.

In many ways this is an album that a young pop star is expected to make. That’s fine, but it’s okay to have wanted more, too. After two hit albums and an Album of the Year Grammy before she was 21, the young Swift earned the right to take risks. *Red*, however, plays it safe, and presents us with another artist trying to keep up with trends rather than set them. —**Todd Martens**

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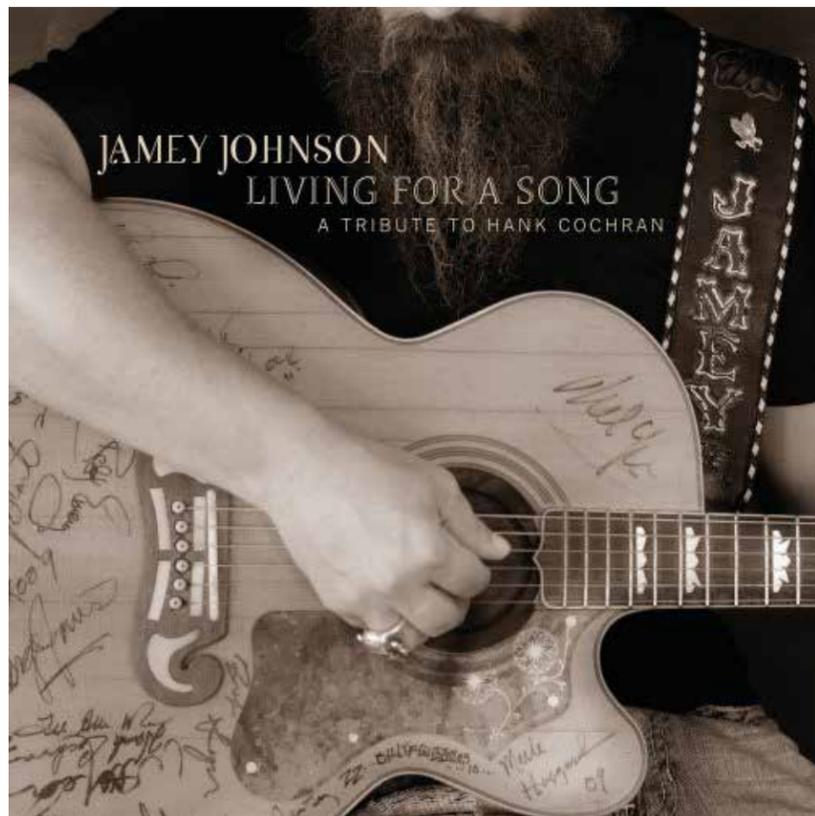
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### Jamey Johnson

*Livin' for a Song: A Tribute to Hank Cochran*  
Mercury Nashville, 2LP or CD

**S**ongwriter Hank Cochran, who passed away in 2010 at the age of 74, was born during the Great Depression, and in his songs, he often sounds like he spent a lifetime trying to shake free from it. Much of the material on *Livin' for a Song*, a new tribute album spearheaded by country rabble-rouser Jamey Johnson, sounds born of heartache, honing in on stately tunes that trace the sad, slow arc of relationships falling to pieces and the deep-seeded scars left behind in their wake. Opener "Make the World Go Away" sets the tone, Johnson and Alison Krauss trading lines about better days gone by ("Do you remember when you loved me?") atop a backdrop of wozy pedal steel and a trickle of piano notes that fall as steadily as teardrops.

Johnson, who hit a career peak in 2010 with his double-LP *The Guitar Song*—a painfully overlooked gem that arguably stands as the best country album of the last ten years—recruited a veritable murderer's row of multi-generational collaborators to the project, including Krauss, Willie Nelson, Elvis Costello, and Leon Russell (perhaps the only man with a beard bountiful enough to stand up to Johnson's own). More important, however, is Johnson's willingness to cede the spotlight to his all-star guests. He gamely plays the sideman when Nelson delivers the devastating opening blow on the battered "Don't You Ever Get Tired of Hurting Me" and acts as Lee Ann Womack's foil on a playful "This Ain't My First Rodeo."

As its title suggests, *Livin' for a Song* keeps the focus first and foremost on Cochran's words. Johnson and his cast of collaborators are careful not to overreach. Arrangements are universally tasteful, and songs generally built from little more than roadhouse piano, unfussy drums, pedal steel, and the occasional country-fried honky-tonk lick. These are wise decisions, and further highlight sharp vocal performances from the likes of Kris Kristofferson (who adds a weathered, roguish charm to "Love Makes a Fool of Us All") and Russell, who brings a lion-in-winter gravitas to "A Way to Survive," a song about holding onto the past as a means of making it through another day.



©Photo by Jack Spencer

Many of Cochran's songs appear rooted in the idea of memory. This is true whether he's embracing the past as a crutch ("A Way to Survive") or staring it down as yet another hurdle to overcome (the shattered "She'll Be Back," which contains the pitch-perfect line "If she's anything like her memory, she'll be back").

Fittingly, then, many of these tunes call to mind another time and place. The music conjures an assortment of rowdy honky-tonks (a spirited "The Eagle") and lonely corner bars (the last-call swoon of "I Fall to Pieces," which tries but can't quite live up to the standard set by Patsy Cline's timeless version). It's little surprise. After all, the 37-year-old Johnson is something of a throwback

himself, and although he's decades removed from elder collaborators like Nelson, Bobby Bare, and Ray Price, he's certainly a kindred spirit.

On this project more than any other, Johnson appears to have fully embraced his role as a musical steward—one that will keep the outlaw tradition alive long after its eldest practitioners are dead and gone. In that sense, his version of "A Way to Survive" starts to take on an even deeper meaning. "I must cling to what's gone," sings Johnson, "If I'm to move on." And so it goes on an album that tightly clings to the past even as it points to an increasingly bright future for the still-rising country star.

—Andy Downing



### Soundgarden

*King Animal*  
Seven Four Entertainment/Republic  
Records, 2LP or CD

**W**hen grunge graybeards Soundgarden hopped on the reunion express in 2010, the band was grandfathered into one of the headlining slots at Chicago's Lollapalooza music festival. The move was warranted, for even if the 90s rock giants weren't playing some of their first shows in about a decade, Soundgarden helped define the Lollapalooza brand in its first incarnation as a touring festival. The group just happened to have a terrible slot, having to close the festival opposite Arcade Fire. Hence, fans were presented with a rather peculiar quandary: see a formidable rock band that hasn't performed live in about 10 years or see an orchestral band in its concept-album prime?

Yet even Soundgarden recognizes it's almost always better the first time, and the sludge-drilling Chris Cornell-fronted outfit dispenses with such criticism on the opening track of its first new album since 1996. "I only ever really wanted a break," Cornell howls in "Been Away Too Long," a song full of lyrical imagery about running in circles. Soundgarden may not know whether it's heading backward or forward, but about 90 seconds into the record, it stops to matter. This is the most conventional, straight-ahead track on the record. Kim Thayil's guitar takes what had been a rather formidable riff and melts it into something that twists and oozes, until it locks into a groove in the song's final moments. The Soundgarden of *King Animal* isn't exactly going anywhere new, but it does make a more than valiant effort to avoid charges of living in the past.

Of the set's 13 tracks—(16 for those who bought the extended edition)—not all burrow as deep. Some, especially the more spacious, less aggressive tracks such as "Blood On the Valley Floor" and "Taree," aim for mysticism but largely just trudge along in trying to find it. Sure, Soundgarden always had the tendency to traffic in somber melodicism, but anyone that's seen the band during the past two years can confirm that it remains a potent little group.

So when *King Animal* lets the band out—lets it stretch and roam—it shows why Soundgarden was and should still be considered one of the more ferocious hard rock bands around. "Non State Actor" begins with a wind 'em guitar riff that clocks its way up and down until it's impossible to try and track where drummer Matt Cameron is heading. "Rowing" lets the band get freaky, as it plays what sounds like a tormented blues song thanks to Ben Shepherd's taunting, out-front bass lines.

The marriage of metal and psychedelics that set Soundgarden apart from the rest of the Pacific Northwest's 90s rock aggressors does so again on *King Animal*. Cornell's vocals get mysteriously lowered deeper into the mix to great effect on the Stonsey "Attrition"; "A Thousand Days Before" takes a left turn with elements of Middle Eastern guitars. The band, unexpectedly, finds the more adventurous aspects of *King Animal* in an expected place. "Here," sings Cornell, "in the dark." —**Todd Martens**



### Kiss

*Monster*  
Universal, LP or CD

**W**hen Kiss first hit the scene in the mid 70s, the band was lousy musicians with a ton of attitude, writing songs about conquering the world and the women that inhabited it. The group's stage show, however, eclipsed anything that came before and brought arena rock to life.

Nearly four decades later, Kiss is a highly polished unit, and *Monster* is perhaps the best-ever Kiss record from standpoints of production, performance, and sound quality. All the Kiss hallmarks are here: massive drums (complete with space echo), huge guitars, and plenty of bravado. But considering this is 2012, the preconceived combination ends up sounding like a Winger album, right down to the carefully calculated breaks in songs where Gene Simmons or Paul Stanley slip in a line of innuendo after the blazing guitars fade to zero.

Akin to how boring Bruce Springsteen sounds when he entertains romantic fantasies of a woman at the checkout counter, Simmons reciting vapid lyrics like "It all comes down to the wall of sound/Yeah, we all bow down to the wall of sound" (amidst countless, perfectly overdubbed guitar bits) and Stanley carrying on about how "he's a freak" are cringingly lame, particularly for 60-year-plus-old guys.

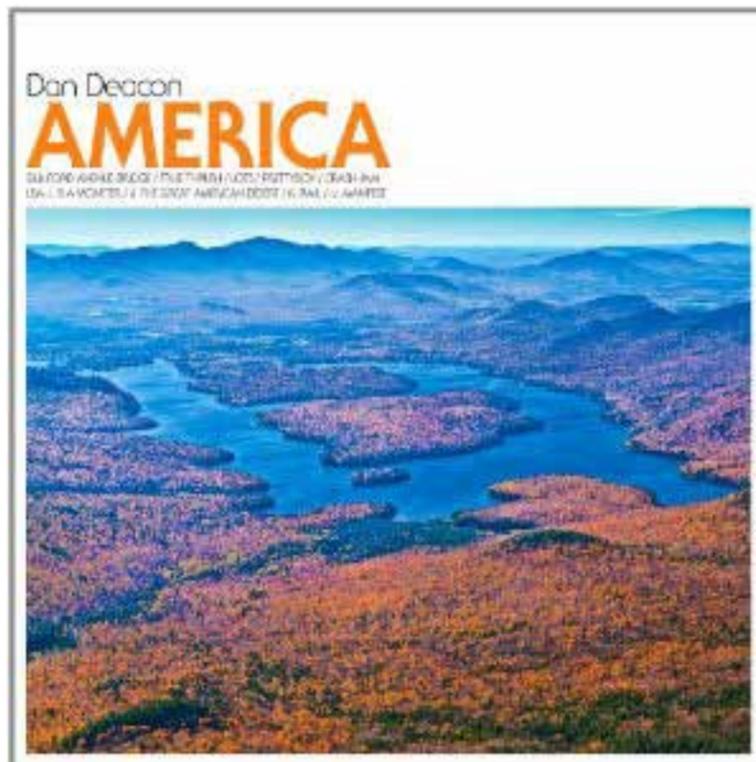
Gene and Paul are too old and too rich to have any credibility singing this stuff. Thank god their marketing brains have not decided that they should cover the American Songbook. Not that it would be much worse.

"Eat Your Heart Out" qualifies as the worst cut on the album. It starts with the guys singing a capella before breaking into a hard-rocking groove, with Simmons proclaiming a "hot mess is just what he needs." As premeditated amounts of fill lurk in the background, the tempo replicates those on the five previous songs. It's all one big Kiss track blended together.

Guitarist Tommy Thayer and drummer Eric Singer contribute more here than on than past efforts. Simmons claims the strategy factors into the band's revitalization, yet it's too little too late. Perhaps he and original bandmate Stanley are just exhausted. For his part, Stanley, as seen via recent YouTube concert footage, has almost entirely lost his voice. Watching and listening to him try and sing the classics isn't pretty.

The high-res version of the album, available on HD Tracks, sounds decent, with the LP taking a back seat in sonics. No surprise there: The vinyl is doubtlessly an afterthought to capitalize on current interest in analog.

*Monster* might have been a good Kiss studio album in 1978. It sucks to grow up.  
—**Jeff Dorgay**



**Dan Deacon**  
*America*  
Domino, LP or CD

**D**an Deacon burst onto the music scene in 2007 with *Spiderman of the Rings*, a playful, low-budget affair that cast the Baltimore-based musician as something of a hyperactive, overgrown child. Layering together kinetic eight-bit beats and sampling everything from Woody Woodpecker to equally cartoonish rapper Ludacris, Deacon crafted giddy dance tracks wholly designed to stimulate the body.

This time around, however, he's just as interested in stimulating the mind.

In recent interviews, Deacon, disheartened by nightly exposure to drug-addled dance crowds, talked about wanting his music to have a deeper, more meaningful impact. In this regard, *America* continues a transition the musician started in 2009 with *Bromst*. There's an increased focus on vocals, and he takes a more classical approach to arrangement and composition—even closing the album with a four-part, 20-minute suite inspired in large part by his burgeoning side career as an avant-garde composer. It's also, in some ways, Deacon's bleakest record, driven by a sense that suggests he's been forced to set aside childhood things and stare down life as an adult.

Deacon, 31, began writing *America* in early 2009 shortly after reading Cormac McCarthy's apocalyptic novel *The Road*. The latter tome's bleak sensibility appears to have bled into his worldview. At times, Deacon comes across like a soothsayer letting loose with a scary vision of the end times, singing: "I see the hillsides burning in flames"; "The light will explode with clouds and ash"; "Nothing's green/Nothing grows/Everything's burned."

*America* opens with "Guilford Avenue Bridge," a tune named for a 174-foot concrete-and-steel expanse in Baltimore. It's a symbolic move—the musician taking one last look back at his beloved hometown before venturing into the American wilderness. From there, the music often spirals off in unexpected directions, moving from the weightless grandiosity of "True Thrush" to "Crash Jam," a buzzing, reverb-heavy number that sounds like towering robots laying waste to entire cities. *(continued)*

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## MUSIC

At times, the album echoes the feel of traversing the American countryside, and songs veer from wild and overgrown to trim and orderly. Nowhere is this truer than on the stunning four-part suite that closes the album. On "Is a Monster," for one, a gorgeous string section slowly gives way to a mechanized, assembly-line beat—a shift that mirrors the sensation of driving past overgrown prairies gradually tamed by concrete and meticulous landscaping. "Rail," in turn, could pass for a lost Kraftwerk track, its repetitive groove evoking a steam locomotive chugging along at full power.

Like the country itself, Deacon's *America* is both awe-inspiring and, at times, horrifying. He balances dark lyrical themes (disease, pestilence, and imminent nuclear destruction) with weirdly optimistic instrumental passages that hint at a deep-seeded belief that things will indeed get better. The musician has repeatedly said he once believed an apocalypse was not only inevitable, but welcome, and his earliest recordings could rightfully be described as the soundtrack to end times—one final, cartoonish blowout before the ship heaves and sinks to the bottom.

These days, however, he looks and sounds like a man determined to avoid disaster, even aligning with the Occupy Wall Street movement. This newborn mindset surfaces most cleanly on the album-closing "Manifest," an anthemic, horn-stoked episode that ends things on an upbeat note. "Hope I get it right tomorrow," sings Deacon as the music builds to a grand, orchestral swell, coming across like a man unwilling to let the looming darkness extinguish his inner light. —*Andy Downing*

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**J**an is the solo project of Kim Talon, something that means nothing to most everyone reading this. Don't worry, this review is not going to chastise anyone for being out of the loop.

Talon was part of a respected cult act in Los Angeles named Eagle & Talon. Correction: A respected cult act in one or two hip neighborhoods of Los Angeles. Every major city claims similar groups—acts that specialize in scrappy but sharp punky, garage rock. The band struggled to sell records and even struggled to raise money on crowd-funding site Kickstarter.



**Jan**  
Jan  
Enclaves, LP or CD

Sadly, Eagle & Talon took a hiatus just as it began to branch out beyond its Sleater-Kinney-inspired roots and brought in more dance textures. As Jan, Talon once again grounds everything in a grimy coat of underground rock. Yet she's also assembled a 12-track collection that's restlessly urban and full of hooky, dependably tough guitars.

"Your education, your art diploma, you think that those are going to save your life," Talon sings on "Cousins," delivering

the line with a scene-it-all before daftness that's a step beyond cynicism. She falls back on streetwise riffs, ultimately developing a sleeves-up attitude matched in tracks such as "How to Beast" and "Work for the City." And there's more than meets the eye, as demonstrated by the latter song, tempered with cooing background harmonies and guitars that ultimately turn on themselves like funhouse mirrors.

The standout instrument is Talon herself. Her vocals aren't

a knockout howl or a thing of pop perfection, but they aptly lead songs in and out of more atmospheric territory—be it the cold starkness of "All of These Igloos" or windswept guitars and creaky-door rhythms of "Ailing Ale." She sings rock songs like they're ballads and slower numbers like they're full of chaos, and when she finds a balance, as on "Act Like a Pantry," the songs become neatly compartmentalized agents of tension. —**Todd Martens**



**Dethklok**  
*Metocalypse: Dethalbum III*  
William Street Records, LP or CD

**W**hen we last heard from Dethklok, the band's revenues were equal to the world's seventh largest economy. Since, the group's reclusive behavior has only increased its appeal. Brisk sales of the new record pushes it to the number four slot, and if the new tour proves as successful as the last, the band could overtake Japan's GNP by year's end. Pressed for answers in a recent interview, lead singer Nathan Explosion merely shrugged his head saying, "Whatever." Ah, the power of make-believe humor and rock farce.

Pulling no punches and leading with "I Ejaculate Fire," *Dethalbum III* checks in as the quintet's most brutal effort yet. Explosion's voice comes full-throttle as he growls above the pummeling, machine-gun fire of bass drums. The remainder of the set retains Dethklok's signature dark vibe, bouncing between themes of death, despair, and the fantasy world it claims as its own.

Surprisingly, the band steps out of its usual guitar-dominated format on "Ghostqueen," dominated by Explosion and percussion. But the lead guitarists get plenty of time to shine. Skwisgaar Skwigelf and Toki Wartooth's Judas Priest-like banter reaches new heights throughout "Killstardo Abominate."

*Dethalbum III* stays relentless in pace, with no breaks in the action. As promised, this is metal as it should be. And if that's not enough, the deluxe edition includes making-of footage. Death to all false metal!

—**Jeff Dorgay**

# Hellfest 2012

Fires burned bright and hot at Hellfest 2012, an annual open-air music festival that unfolded over three days in mid-June in Clisson, France.



# Audio by Van Alstine

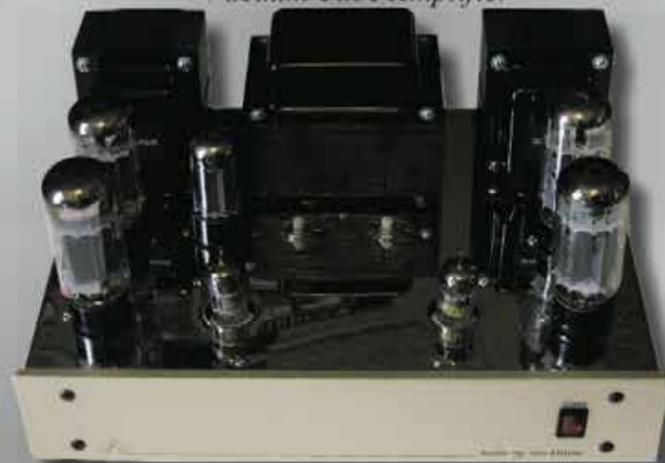
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# King Diamond

Passage to hell: Iconic metal vocalist King Diamond reigned from behind a metal-barred sanctuary, singing solo and Mercyful Fate songs.

FESTIVAL



# Megadeth

Peace sells, but who's buying? Megadeth leader Dave Mustaine (corner right) pulled out the double-neck guitar as he and bandmate Chris Broderick (top) kicked out the jams.



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FESTIVAL

Aye, matey! Norwegian glam-punk band Turbonegro brought good-time noise and advertised the newest MAC eye-makeup line during a crazed set.

Turbonegro

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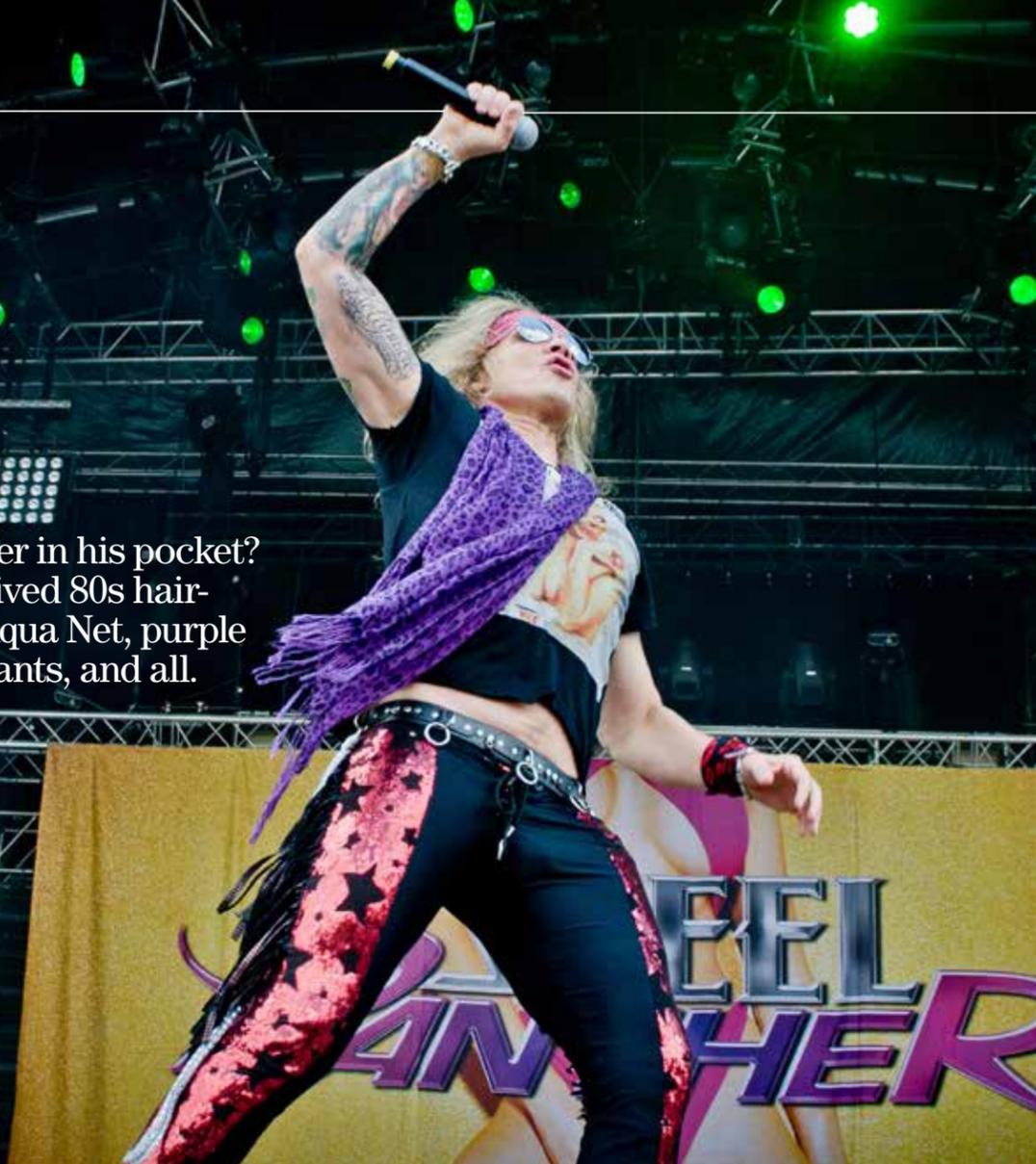
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FESTIVAL

With a little help from their friends: Biohazard turned its set into a block party. What, you weren't invited?

*Biohazard*

Is that a cucumber in his pocket? Steel Panther relived 80s hair-metal glories—Aqua Net, purple scarves, glitter pants, and all.



# Steel Panther

Who knew they served beer in hell?

©Photos by Mark Latham  
marklatham.co.uk2012

**R**ock's secret history can be found within the catalog of Yo La Tengo. For approximately 30 years, the band has survived on the borders of all that is mainstream in pop. Pastoral, dissonant, confused, and direct: Yo Lo Tengo albums skirt in and around all of it.

A new Yo La Tengo record is therefore often an affirmation of the dependable, its carefully arranged pop orchestrations providing a backbone for much of what sprouts into indie rock. *Fade* presents the band at its loveliest, a relatively svelte collection of meditative tunes regarding the endurance of relationships—the good, the bad, and the mostly in-between.

©Photo by Jesper Eklow



### Yo La Tengo

*Fade*

Matador Records, LP or CD

"We try not to lose our hearts, not to lose our minds," the trio of Ira Kaplan, Georgia Hubley, and James McNew harmonize on opening "Ohm," the longest track at more than six minutes. The tune's sonic architecture is, like much of Yo La Tengo's fare, minimal; its instrumental lines so clearly drawn that it feels like a piece of modern art. The rhythmic shuffle, the handclaps, and the fuzz-drenched guitar all exist as separate but integral pieces of a puzzle.

Yo La Tengo has long found comfort in the drone of the Velvet Underground, and the collective has long possessed the ability to make the ghosts of rock's past feel current and vital. The new LP's first five tracks outline Yo La Tengo's rock influences, and the latter five gradually evaporate them one piece at a time, until moments sometimes feel as if they barely exist. With Tortoise's John McEntire lending a hand in production, *Fade* balances orchestral elements—the closing

"Before We Run" is a mini-symphony—with explosions of studio haze.

But, with everything in studious moderation, it all feels of a singular piece.

"Stupid Things" acts as a bridge, its serenading guitar lines propelled by a locomotive groove. Its emotional core operates as a plea for maintaining perspective. "I'll Be Around" is little more than some techy feedback and delicately strummed guitar, and "The Point of It" functions a lullaby set to celebrate the joys of getting older. The music lingers long after dissipating, especially the metronome chords and calming trumpet of "Cornelia and Jane." Hubley sings lead, her tranquil voice a head on your shoulder.

"I hear them whispering, just out of view," she whispers, urging listeners not to pay attention to the voices that can keep one up at night. Once again, Yo La Tengo is a testament to the comfort of the familiar. —**Todd Martens**

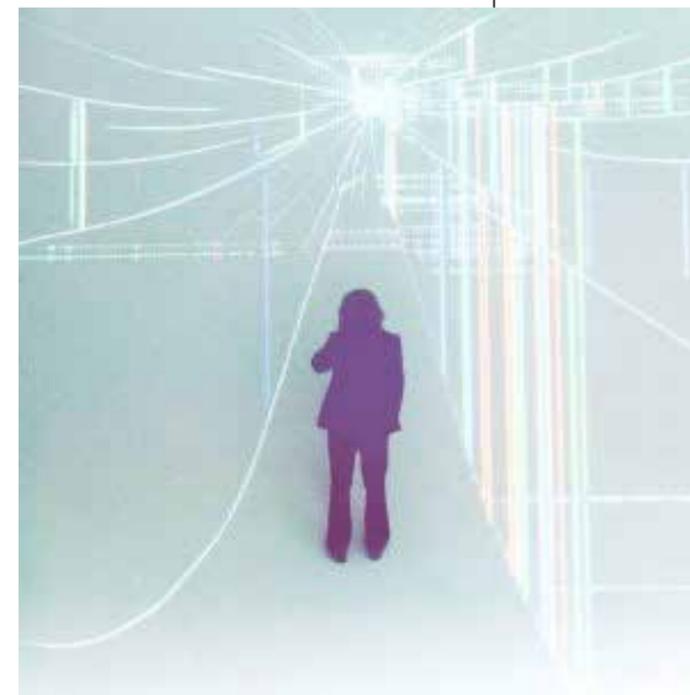


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### Jim James

*Regions of Light and Sound of God*  
ATO Records, LP or CD

“**N**othing ever stays like it was in the beginning,” sings Jim James in the midst of his full-length solo debut, *Regions of Light and Sound of God*. “Nothing ever stays the same way for too long.”

This is certainly true of both James and his longtime band My Morning Jacket. The Louisville-based crew first emerged in the late 90s as a throwback to the classic Southern rock era before slowly morphing into art-rock weirdos over the course of a half-dozen wildly divergent albums. James has adopted a similar approach outside the ensemble. He's recorded alongside M. Ward, Conor Oberst, and Mike Mogis in the eclectic supergroup Monsters of Folk and released a stripped-down tribute to late-Beatle George Harrison under the regrettable name Yim Yames.

The singer's evolution continues on *Regions of Light and Sound of God*, which sounds vaguely futuristic despite taking significant lyrical inspiration from Lynn Ward's 1929 graphic novel *State of the Art (A.E.I.O.U.)*. Dense and moody, it's awash in plodding piano, creeping funk guitar, and scraggly digital textures. *(continued)*

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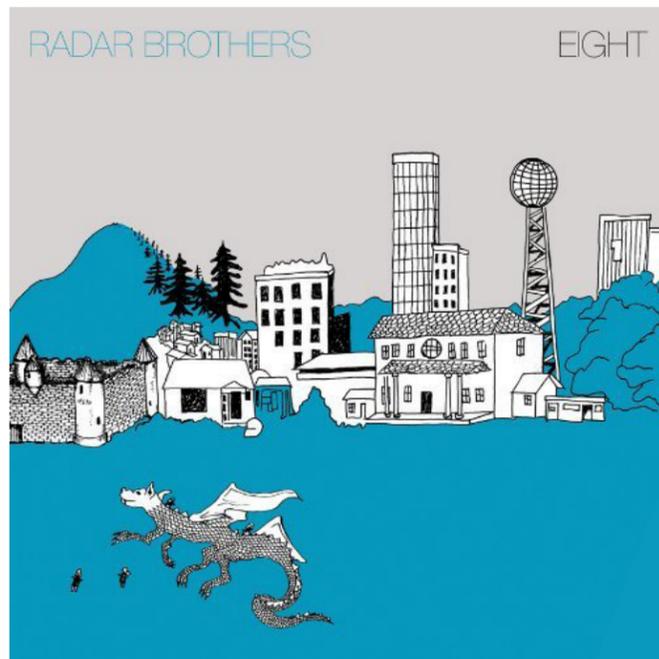
©Photo by Neil Krug

Despite his ongoing explorations both of spirituality and self, James doesn't take himself all that seriously—even if this audacious, immersive solo turn, which connects far more often than it falls flat, suggests otherwise.

From there, the singer ventures deeper into spacey jazz odysseys (“Know Til Know”), fractured funk (“Of the Mother Again”), and cinematic turns like “Actress,” a gorgeous tune built around sweeping strings that could have been lifted from a classic film score. “A New Life,” in turn, sounds like James’ attempt at a big, 1950s-style Roy Orbison ballad. As the song builds to a towering crescendo, it’s a pleasure to hear the frontman finally let it rip.

While James devotes much of his time wrestling with big ideas—“I’m straining to remember just what it means to be alive,” he sings early on—he occasionally flashes a much-needed playful side. On “Know Til Know” the hirsute vocalist/guitarist expresses being “at a loss for words,” and immediately follows the admission with a brief, wordless moan. When he begins questioning humanity on “State of the Art,” his voice cracks and digitizes, suggesting a glitch in the Matrix. Then, on “A New Life,” James chuckles after delivering the line, “I think I’m really being sincere.”

The implication is clear: despite his ongoing explorations both of spirituality and self, James doesn't take himself all that seriously—even if this audacious, immersive solo turn, which connects far more often than it falls flat, suggests otherwise. —**Andy Downing**



### Radar Brothers

*Eight*

Merge Records, LP or CD

**Y**es, this is the eighth album from the Radar Brothers. But focusing on the title and number adds up to an overwhelming way to approach it. The Los Angeles band—essentially now a collective revolving around sonic architect Jim Putnam—has over the last decade-plus released seven albums that leisurely sway in the direction of Laurel Canyon-inspired folk pop.

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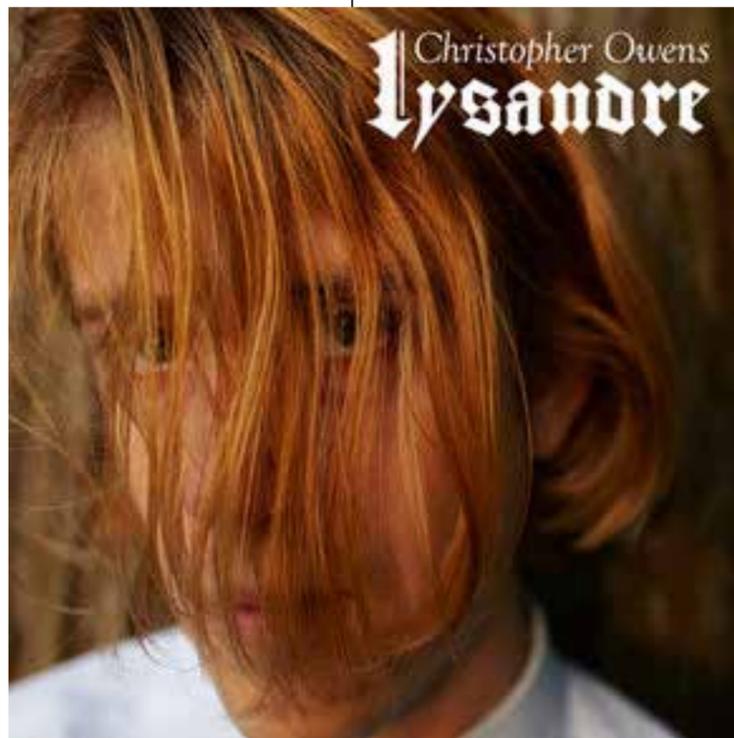


*Eight* constitutes something of a reboot. It's not a full re-imagining or revamping of a sound that's long been able to inspire hammock envy. Rather, it argues that this is now the place to start delving into the group's music. Here, Radar Brothers swell to a sextet, with three new additions since 2010's *The Illustrated Garden*. The most illustrious recruit happens to be Dan Lead, formerly of L.A.'s sadly little-known power pop outfit, the Broken West.

Two other fresh faces, Brian Cleary and Ethan Walter, specialize in keyboards and piano. All told, they create a pop band with a little more rock n' roll energy (see "Reflections") and quite a bit more mysticism (see each of these 11 tracks, but begin with "Change College of Law"). Songs such as the slide guitar-infused "Couch" and the piano reverie "Horse Down" echo Mercury Rev, while cuts placing the guitars out front ("Time Rolling By") are reminiscent of Granddaddy's thoughtful style. An aural relaxant that deflects attention, Putnam's voice sets the mood throughout. His singing burrows into the arrangement, be it via the plucky bass notes and hollow grooves of "Bottle Song" or fuzzy mantra-like melodies of "Change College of Law."

Little is said and much is repeated throughout "House of Mirrors," on which keyboards sneak in more interstellar textures. But the truly uncharted territory arrives courtesy of the shoegazey "If We Were Banished" and weirdly demented "Ebony Bow," with its cult-like vocal pleas, disoriented guitar solos, and cresting keyboard atmospheres. *Eight* proves there's always something new to learn.

—Todd Martens



**Christopher Owens**

*Lysandre*  
Fat Possum, LP or CD

**O**

n 2011's *Father, Son, Holy Ghost*, the album that might prove to be Girls' swansong, frontman Christopher Owens came across like a musical pilgrim on a quest to uncover deeper meanings in life. Working with bandmate Chet "JR" White, among others, the singer turned out sprawling, epic guitar jams that delved into weighty themes like religion, sin, redemption, death, and enlightenment.

On *Lysandre*, Owens' first solo release since unexpectedly breaking up Girls last July, his scope significantly narrows. The songs are smaller and more personal, inspired by his former band's first tour and a brief albeit intense relationship he shared with a woman with whom fell in love at a music festival.

The romantic intimacy carries over into a mellower musical backdrop, which touches on 1970s rock ("Here We Go"), 1770s folk (the flute-laced "Lysandre's Theme," which suggests a Renaissance Fair in full swing) and, briefly, calypso (the oceanside getaway of "Riviera Rock"). "New York City" packs in one of the best saxophone solos this side of the E Street Band, a riotous free-for-all that neatly rescues the much-maligned instrument from the soft-rock hell of recent Bon Iver recordings. *(continued)*

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*Lysandre* is essentially constructed as a two-part suite. In the first, Owens recounts his early days in Girls (“Look at us in New York City,” he sings with wide-eyed delight on “New York City,” “Everybody is listening to me!”). In the second, he falls in love with a girl and spends days at a time in her arms before distance gradually forces them apart. The album-closing “Part of Me (Lysandre’s Epilogue)” effectively ties together the seemingly disparate threads, a chastened Owens offering a final goodbye to the girl/Girls as he sings, “Oh you were a part of me/That part of me is gone.”

It’s unwise to dismiss *Lysandre* as a simple breakup album, however. While a handful of tunes are certainly born of heartache, including the aptly titled “A Broken Heart,” Owens doesn’t waste many moments wallowing (“Don’t try to harsh my mellow, man,” he sings like a 1960s flower child on “Here We Go Again”). Overall, he sounds more interested in taking stock of the ways these intense relationships shaped him as both a man and a musician.

On the album-opening “Here We Go,” the lone track that hints at the Girls of old (note the searing guitar solo that surfaces and quickly recedes about 90 seconds in), Owens exudes the confidence of youth as he sings, “I’ve got it all figured out.” He then spends the rest of his time detailing how much he has left to learn, turning out incisive songs rooted in falling-outs with friends (on “New York City” he details a run-in with a pocketknife-wielding associate) and lovers alike (“Everywhere You Knew” reconstructs the final days of a doomed relationship in photographic detail). It’s a credit to Owens’ talent—and his prospects as a solo artist moving forward—that he can make such personal statements ring out like deep, universal truths. —**Andy Downing**



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### Veronica Falls

*Waiting for Something to Happen*  
Slumberland Records, CD

**S**omewhere between Fantasyland and Frontierland, I wanted to hear Veronica Falls. Disneyland alone isn't for everyone, but I've done it now five times in 2012, most recently in mid-December. I love the place, so much so that merely stepping onto Main Street U.S.A. brings tears of nostalgic joy to my face each and every time I do it.

Yet going the single-rider route during the holidays can be tough. Not the Pogues' bitter, angry heartbreak of "Fairytale of New York" tough, just more wistful. The sense that something—or someone—is missing. And yet, there are still those tears of joy that materialize at a time and place that inspires such happiness.

Such a mix of innocent optimism and grown-up realism permeates the guitar-driven garage pop of Veronica Falls. Jangly guitars rush songs forward, but casually languid vocals and harmonies create a feeling of running in place. The narrators on this 13-track collection are dreamers. "We can dream together," helpfully sings Roxanne Clifford on "My Heart Beats," and on "Teenage," she simply wants to share a late-night drive around town with a crush.

Yet idealism is busted throughout. The thumping rhythms of "So Tired" arrive in pre-party excitement mode, but Clifford is tired of being alone, tired of people she knows. "Everybody's Changing" slows things down for minor-key melancholy and "Shooting Star" waits for a fairytale ending—with menace. Here, back-and-forth vocals between Clifford and James Hoare aren't used to harmonize or echo, but haunt. *(continued)*

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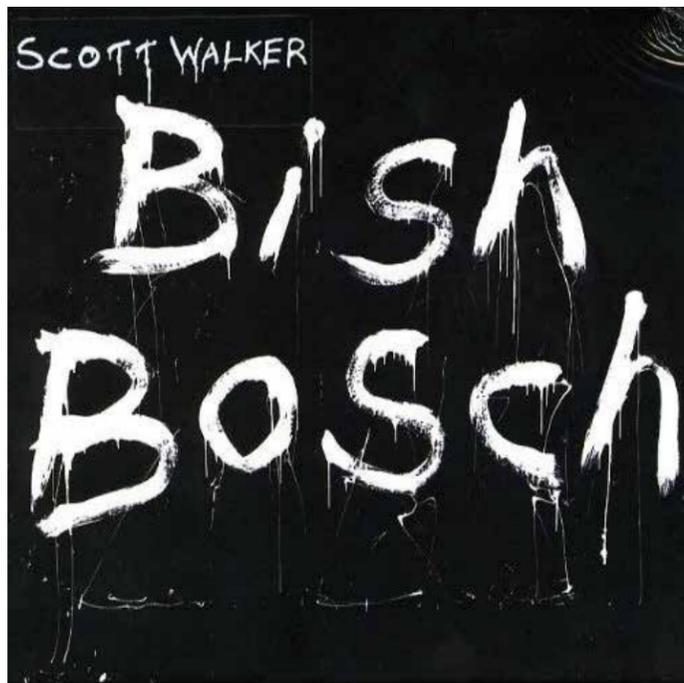
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©Photo by Robin Silas Christian

The London-based band, after all, still obsesses over death imagery and hangs on to the misguided romanticism that posits suffering must come before enjoyment. Yet if the act's self-titled 2011 debut channeled the vibe associated with the tragic girl-group songs of yore, on *Waiting for Something to Happen*, Veronica Falls speak strictly of metaphorical matters of the heart. "Buried Alive" views a relationship as a death sentence and, complete with swooning harmonies, it qualifies as one the more hooky songs.

Ultimately, it's a warts-and-all look at getting along, and one that isn't going to let a crummy mood ruin a three-minute pop song. "Everybody's crazy," Clifford sings on the title track. "What's your excuse, baby?"  
—Todd Martens



### Scott Walker

*Bish Bosch*  
4AD, 2LP or CD

**S**cott Walker's recent output can be described as easy listening for asylum inmates and mass murderers.

In the midst of his third album in 17 years, which bears only a passing resemblance to any form of popular music, the 69-year-old wails about cutting off his "reeking gonads" and feeding them to another man's "shrunken face" like some kind of self-mutilating Hannibal Lecter. The musical backdrop is similarly disturbing, Walker constructing an unfinished symphony of horror-film strings, found sounds, cold electronics, operatic outbursts, shrieking guitars, and trash-compactor drums.

*Bish Bosch*, the final part in a trilogy that started with 1995's *Tilt* and continued in 2006 with *The Drift*, opens with 30 seconds of punishing drums overlaid with a cringe-inducing metallic screech. The segment turns out to be one of the more accessible moments on the album—a fact to which Walker alludes when he sings, "If you're listening to this you must have survived," four minutes into the record's penultimate track. The avant-garde musician delivers the laugh-out-loud line with a knowing wink, as though fans that endured his prior abuse are roughly the equivalent of the bloody survivors left standing at the end of a slasher flick. It's been a startling evolution for Walker, who first emerged in the 1960s as a lush, orchestral pop balladeer before entering this second, significantly more challenging career phase.

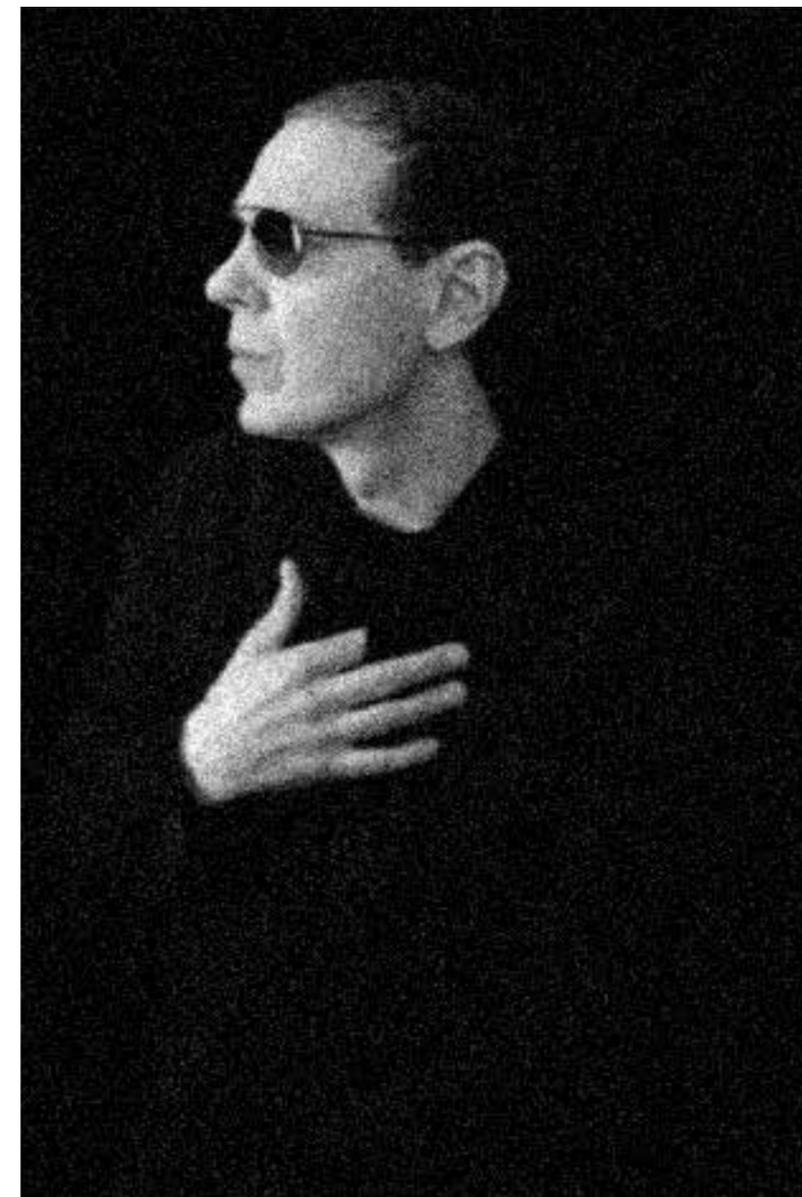
While undoubtedly difficult, *Bish Bosch* is also, at times, immensely rewarding. Like Diamanda Galas, Jacques Brel, or even Richard Wagner, Walker has a way of hitting on sounds that provoke primal, animalistic responses in listeners. "Epizootics!," for one, veers between weirdly atmospheric passages and deep explosions of brass that make it sound as though a second-line parade accidentally wandered through the studio. Walker's vocal intro on "Corp De Blah," in turn, is downright lovely, particularly in contrast with the chaos surrounding it. Then there are the snarling metal guitars that briefly cut through the morass on "Phrasing," circling the singer like hungry jungle cats.

Unfortunately, Walker's ambitions often trump accessibility. So it goes on "SDSS14+13B (Zercon, A Flagpole Sitter)," a 20-minute-plus patience-tester that hasn't verses, chorus, or discernible structure. It does, however, include lyrical references to Attila the Hun, Louis B. Meyer, and Luis Bunuel's *Simon of the Desert*. Later on in the album, he inexplicably starts singing in Danish.

Akin to director David Lynch, who enjoys a similar reputation as an outsider artist, Walker enjoys blending the high brow with the low. In Lynch's *Blue Velvet*, Dennis Hopper's villain offered cheers with working-class favorite beverage Pabst Blue Ribbon ("Heineken? FUCK THAT SHIT!"). Here, Walker occasionally breaks from his more esoteric cultural references to drop "yo mama" jokes. Vide, "You're so fat when you wear a yellow raincoat people scream, 'Taxi!'" and "Does your face hurt? Cause it's killing me," which, unfortunately, are actual lines on the record.

Yes, these adolescent asides are included to prod and provoke, and fall in line with the general themes of cruelty and human suffering that have largely defined Walker's work since the mid-90s. Still, even the musician's most ardent supporters have to be hoping that, next time around, he inflicts a little less of the punishment on his audience.

—Andy Downing



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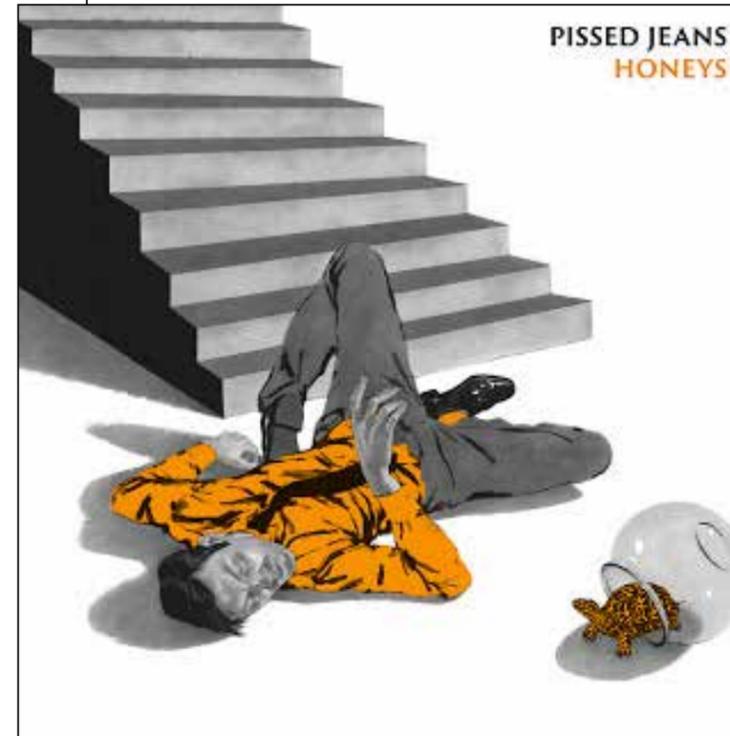
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Honeys  
Sub Pop, LP or CD

**F**or as much as the debate over healthcare dominated our recent election cycle, the topic rarely creeps up in rock n' roll. Whether this is due to any perceived lack of sexiness related to the inner workings of Obamacare or simply a desire on the part of our musicians to remain non-partisan on issues of health and wellness is a topic still open for research. In the meantime, Pennsylvania's rock n' roll Garbage Pail Kids, Pissed Jeans, have actually opted to vent their frustrations with the world of co-pays and doctor referrals. They simply want none of it.

Stertorous vocalist Matt Korvette doesn't waste any time in "Health Plan," a two-minute song full of howls, grunts, and chainsaw-fast guitars. He first acknowledges his grown-up responsibilities and then spits on them. "Now is the time in my life to choose a health plan," he sings, delivering the line with one of the most patient growls in hard rock." You wanna know my secret? I stay away from doctors." *(continued)*



©Photo by Sasha Morgan

It's as if the Tommy in the Replacements' "Tommy Gets His Tonsils Out" has grown up with a lifelong fear of medical practitioners and started a band to rant and rave about the more mundane aspects of modern life. "You're Different in Person" uses a slightly funky, stutter-step rhythm to address disappointment in online matchmaking. "Cafeteria Food" arrives as the rare mid-paced song, but it's the most sinister track, with stalking drums and persistent, static-drenched guitars.

While the sludgy quartet may appear to want to help you eat healthier, there's usually an ulterior motive in each burst of noise. Good news, for instance, is equated in "Cafeteria Food" as "feeling like I'm not the father." The snarling, Jesus Lizard-like intensity of "Teenage Adult" both condemns and

celebrates Peter Pan syndrome, and "Loubs" stretches a high-heels obsession to nearly five minutes, finding new uses for feedback with every verse.

Five or so years ago, Pissed Jeans initially came across as just a bunch of bratty loudmouths that harkened back to Sub Pop's underground roots. Yet on *Honeys*, its fourth effort and third LP for the label, the band has found its stride by gradually adding more humor. Plus, no-frills rock is making a comeback of late—even if Pissed Jeans lacks the melodic rush of FIDLAR or ferocity of Ceremony.

Still, Pissed Jeans has advice for those wanting more. "Take all my faults and twist them in your head until I look like a sweet and thoughtful man," Korvette sings on "Romanticize Me." Put your mind to work.

—**Todd Martens**

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# The Year in Rock and Pop Box Sets



## A “Great Eight,” and Several Commendable Specialized Releases

By Bob Gendron

**E**volution by way of specialization. Following the same patterns driving craft beer and farm-to-table gastropubs, most 2012 box sets targeted specific audiences rather than general listeners. And they’re better for it. Recognizing that the era during which the public willingly shelled out for multidisc career anthologies and lavish greatest-hits packages is gone—as well as the fact that nearly every deserving artist already received such treatment—labels catered to hardcore fans of specific performers and genres.

While the strategy means fewer coffetable-worthy collections exist than in years past, most green-lighted sets claim a quality, elaborateness, and comprehensiveness rarely seen just several years ago. Not surprisingly, fewer labels are making them. Rhino, which once released several titles per month, has all but exited the market. A force for decades, Sony Legacy now reigns as the undisputed king of box sets.

With niche marketing holding sway, the line between essential and appealing has increased. Several hyper-specialized sets qualify as irresistible curiosity items aimed at discrete tastes. Not that some of these boxed volumes aren’t worth seeking out. Watain’s *Opus Diaboli* (black metal and underground fans, rejoice); the wonderfully packaged Grateful Dead *Spring 1990* (five concerts documenting one of the collective’s last well-regarded tours constitute bliss for Deadheads yet aren’t the place to start for casual fans); and the Tompkins Square label’s *Work Hard, Play Hard, Pray Hard: Hard Time, and End Time Music 1923-1936* (a three-disc volume of obscure country and folk drawn from the library of a Kentucky collector) warrant exploration.

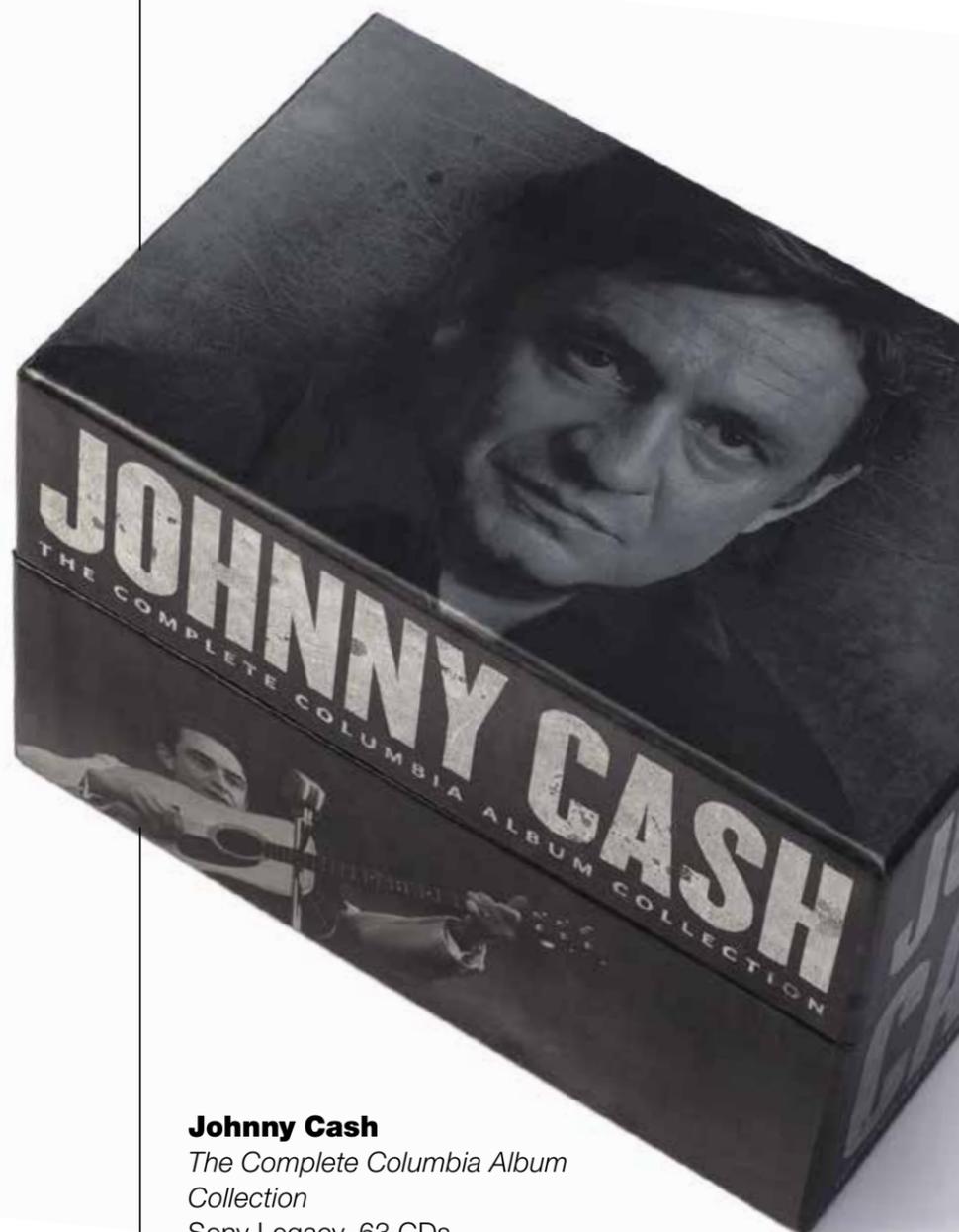
Vinyl boxes? We cover and recommend the Beatles’ *Stereo Box* in Issue 50. Analog lovers can also discover rewards by way of the *Blur Vinyl Box Set* (contains each of the group’s seven studio efforts, and the first five LPs are remastered from the original source material); the Velvet Underground’s *The Verve/MGM Albums* (mono versions of the band’s first three efforts, plus more, but you’ll deal with inferior packaging); William Basinski’s *The Disintegration Loops* (wordless music and metaphor at their ultimate); and, for collectors, crate diggers, and soul aficionados, Numero Group’s massive *Omnibus 45 Set* (a trove of 45 rare and unique 45RPM soul singles).

Be certain, however, to save shelf space for the following—the “great eight” box sets of 2012. Whether celebrating iconic albums, bringing to light time-capsule performances, or making a strong case for the increased historical merit of an artist, they offer insight, context, purpose, extraordinary music, and first-rate packaging. (Prices reflect suggested retail; in almost every case, titles can be found for much cheaper.)

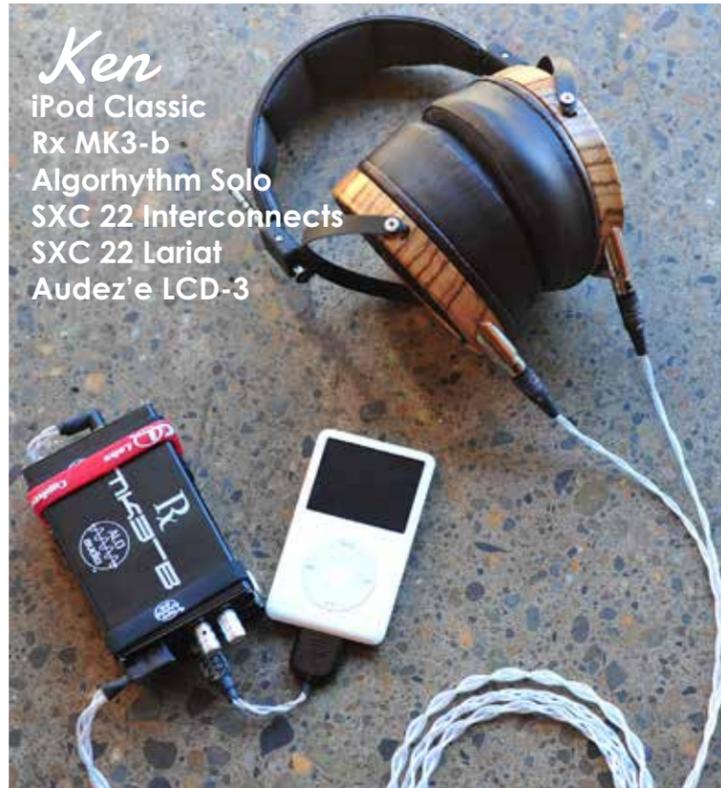
Sixty-three CDs by any artist equals a daunting number. Even for Johnny Cash. Amassing every single last one of the Man

In Black's albums for Columbia—including 35 never before released on disc in the U.S., and his first 19 titles presented in mono—this heavyweight contender spans 1958's *The Fabulous Johnny Cash* through 1986's *Heroes* (with Waylon Jennings), and also encompasses both Highwaymen efforts and two new, expertly assembled compilations. Overkill? Not, as it happens, when Cash is concerned.

Save for Bob Dylan and Ray Charles, no other single musician touches on so many styles with such authority. Cash's commercial success afforded him license for multifaceted thematic albums, and whether delving into gospel, American Indian ballads, western fare, rockabilly, traditional folk, patriotic hymns, holiday jingles, or children's tunes, he does right by them all. Is every attempt a classic? No. Even the greats occasionally miss the mark. Yet, by and large, what's here boggles the senses. Apart from the nearly impeccable string of releases stretching from '58 through '70, pay close attention to 1973's live *Pa Osteraker*, (continued)



**Johnny Cash**  
*The Complete Columbia Album Collection*  
 Sony Legacy, 63 CDs  
 \$325

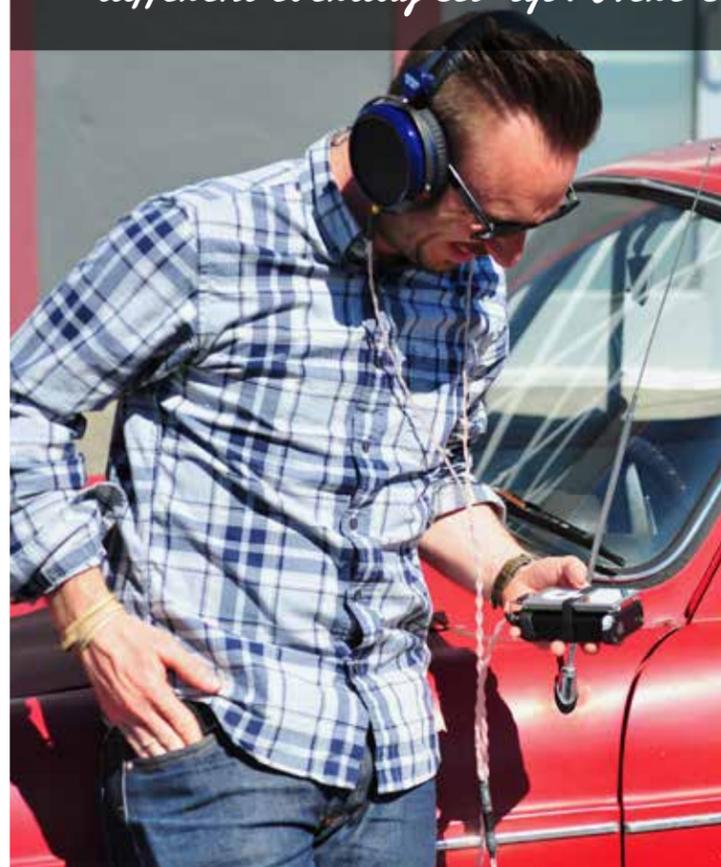


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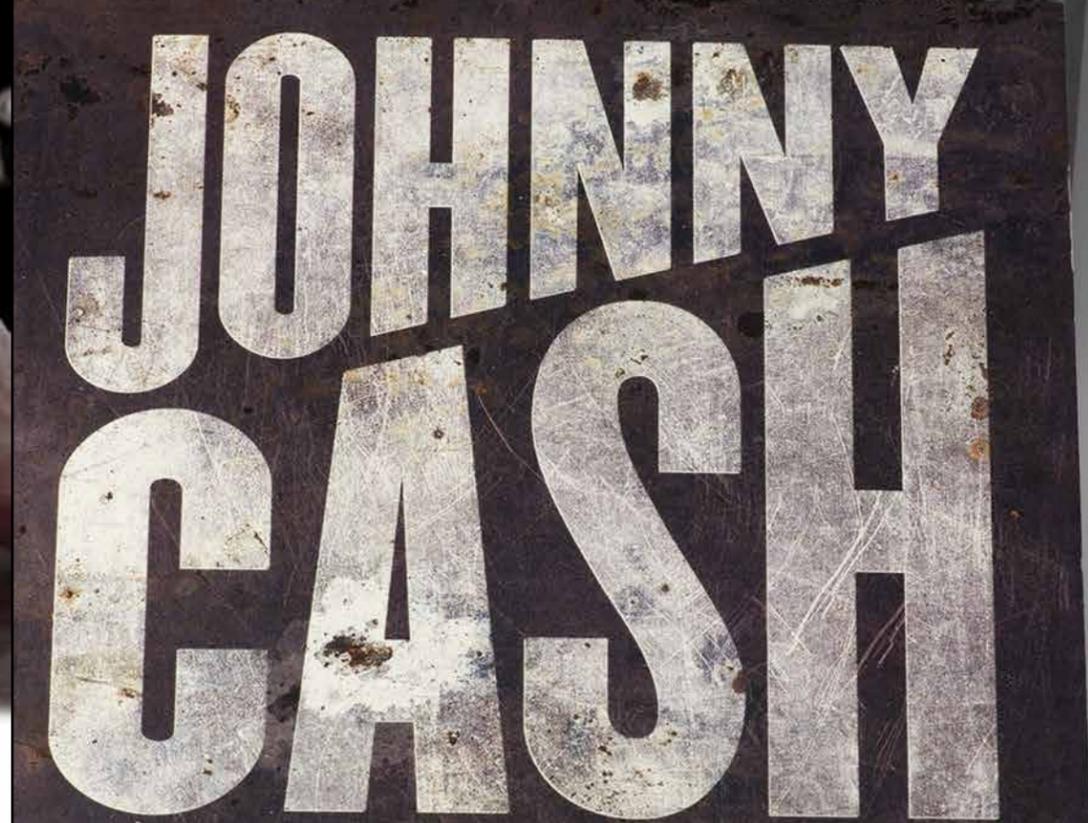
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THE COMPLETE COLUMBIA ALBUM COLLECTION

1974's *John R. Cash*, and the pre-American Records entry *Johnny 99*, an album that suggests Cash ready for his comeback but without an influential power broker in the form of Rick Rubin to secure him an audience.

*The Complete Columbia Album Collection* accomplishes a multitude of feats. None are larger than begging a looming question: Does Cash, given the diversity, scope, and quality of music produced over this roughly three-decade period, stand taller than former labelmate Elvis Presley? The answer seems to lean towards the affirmative. Cash may not have Graceland or the built-up myths, but then again, this champion of freedom, justice, peace, and equality isn't the type of hero that needs a postage stamp to solidify his legacy. Courtesy of this project, a re-evaluation of rock music's preminent figures is in order.

Situated in chronological order in a flip-top box, the CDs are housed in mini-LP replica sleeves with original artwork. A fat, 200-page book contains pertinent details and 5,000-word essay. Seminal.

**C**onsidered by myriad music aficionados the best reissue label in the biz, Numero Group established its sterling reputation by way of rescuing from the dust bin largely forgotten-about regional soul, gospel, and pop. With rare exception, the imprint's finds usually date from the 60s and 70s, and boast eccentric backstories. Meticulous liner notes accompany every release, as do a plethora of surprises. The label's first venture into rock involves a band only slightly more well known to general audiences than many of its R&B-based titles, but one that's magnificently important.

The first artist signed to Sub Pop that completely deviated from the "grunge" aesthetic, Codeine enjoyed a relatively short existence before its members, concerned they'd slide into less-than-perfectionist standards if they soldiered on, called it a day. The trio's meager output—two full-length LPs, one EP, and a handful of singles produced over the course of roughly four years—nonetheless garnered the attention of both the indie and mainstream press, which, akin to the collective's peers, marveled at its dirge-like tempos, introverted heaviness, and time-defying restraint.

Aptly named, the group employs unhurriedness as a numbing agent. Conveying themes of detachment and deficiency with stoic poise, vocals are seemingly devoid of emotions unrelated to despair or disappointment. Distorted, gunmetal-gray guitar swells droop and hang like opaque curtains, while the band's secret weapon—frill-free percussion that moves s-l-o-w albeit sprawls across vast canvasses—freezes everything in place. The sonic hybrid stood apart from metal, industrial, goth, or anything else of the time. Songs are oddly beautiful and surreal, euphoric and calm. Codeine carries the minimalist, barren aesthetics over to the album covers. Dim stars rest against a desolate white backdrop; a grand European palace and gardens, so enormous they appear isolated, suspend reality; a birch tree hibernates in winter.

Supplementing the complete studio output, demos and unreleased fare on Numero's opulent box aurally disclose Codeine's music wasn't as easily to make as it sounds to the naked ear. Each cut is cause for greater reflection and appreciation. Three essays dig beneath the band's surface history. Every significant underground artist should be so lucky to have its own version of *When I See the Sun*.

### Codeine

*When I See the Sun*  
Numero Group, 3 CDs/ 6 LPs  
\$80



**Michael Jackson**

*BAD: 25th Anniversary Edition*  
 Sony Legacy, 3 CDs/1 DVD  
 \$40

**N**o artist in history has ever felt what it must have been like for Michael Jackson to follow-up their sophomore album. That's because no studio set has ever sold in such vast quantities as 1982's *Thriller*. After sweeping the Grammy awards and piling up 25-plus million in sales in the U.S. alone, what does one do for an encore? No matter what he created, Jackson could've never pleased everyone or met expectations.

Long lurking in the shadows of its ubiquitous predecessor, *BAD* is placed in a renewed context thanks to this opinion-changing reissue. Augmented by a disc of standout B-sides, demos, and rarities—and a DVD containing Jackson's July 16, 1988 concert at Wembley Stadium (audio contents are replicated on a CD)—the multimedia set eradicates previous criticisms suggesting the record a calculated imitation of *Thriller*, albeit one with more modernized arrangements.

*(continued)*



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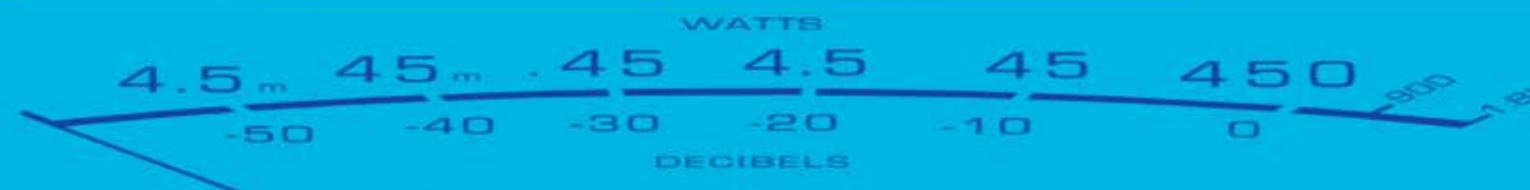
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Revisiting songs such as the anthemic title track, inward-looking “Man in the Mirror,” metal-flirting “Dirty Diana,” and, particularly, the rhythm- and gravity-defying “Smooth Criminal” reveals Jackson as his era’s Michael Jordan. He’s a five-tool pop perfectionist that not only wants to dominate the field, but crush the competition. Sure, there’s no rescuing the duet with Stevie Wonder (“Just Good Friends”), but the sleek combination of dance grooves, rock drive, and R&B beats throughout come across as having not lost an edge.

Slightly drab on CD, the concert reaches fever pitch on DVD. Jackson’s dancing and choreographic displays remain marvels, and the era’s iconic fashions conjure a communal feel absent from much of today’s scene. Two full-color, photo-filled booklets round out the celebration.



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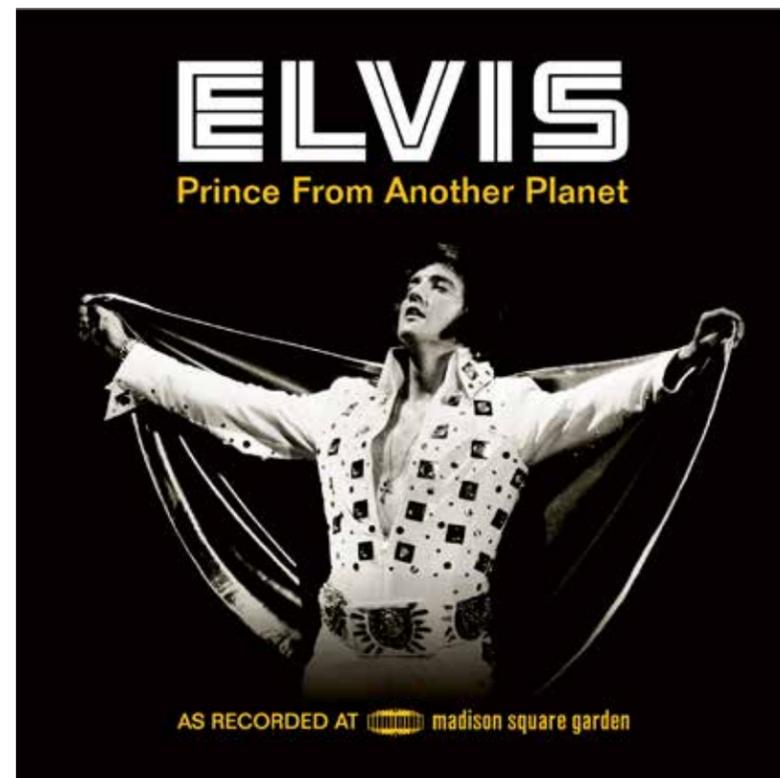
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**Elvis Presley**  
*Prince From Another Planet*  
 Sony Legacy, 2 CDs/1 DVD  
 \$35

**T**aking its name from a *New York Times* headline trumpeting a review of Elvis Presley's four sold-out shows at Madison Square Garden in early June 1972, *Prince From Another Planet* amasses in newly remixed form the previously issued *An Afternoon in the Garden* and *Elvis As Recorded At Madison Square Garden*, along with a DVD touting previously unseen handheld-shot footage of the afternoon concert. As box sets go, it's rather compact. And while these shows represent Presley's first-ever public gigs in New York City, history alone doesn't justify the collection. What does is the fact that it spotlights a pair of incredible performances during a time many believed the icon to have already passed into cartoonish "Fat Elvis" form. Not so.

Aided by one of the greatest support groups to ever grace a stage—the TCB Band, counting guitarist James Burton, drummer Ronnie Tutt, and bassist Jerry Scheff among its ranks—as well as several backing vocalists and an orchestra, Presley blitzes through a heterogeneous repertoire with pronounced command, blinding speed, tangible enthusiasm, and almost-vengeful determination. On classics such as "Hound Dog" and "That's All Right," tempos

are almost doubled, the musicians keeping up with their leader's every insinuation to push ahead with rabid intent. Presley barely pauses to catch a breath, and the wildly divergent setlists afford no easy outs. Grandiosity—Presley enters to *Also Sprach Zarathustra*, pitches impassioned takes of "An American Trilogy" to Mt. Everest-like peaks, and ups the drama to soap-opera heights on horn-soaked readings of "You've Lost That Lovin' Feelin'"—conveys the

impression that royalty truly presided over the affairs.

Forget the '68 *Comeback Special*; no official live Presley release tops the commotion, frenzy, sweat, and adrenaline here. A vivid 54-page book catches fire courtesy of Patti Smith guitarist and veteran journalist Lenny Kaye's 5000-word essay on the spectacle, accompanied by illuminating photos, newspaper article reprints, and interview transcripts.





### Rage Against the Machine

*Rage Against the Machine: XX*  
Sony Legacy, 2 CDs/2 DVDs/ 1 LP  
\$120

*“Are these guys any good?”* audibly mutter passersby, wondering whether or not the then-unknown band playing on a college campus is worth their time. Captured by a single camera, Rage Against the Machine’s first public performance in October 1991 stands out not for winning over converts but because of how locked-in the band already sounds. Playing most of the songs that landed on its self-titled debut, extolled for its 20th anniversary in this multi-format box set in which the aforementioned event is presented on DVD, the quartet attacks with uncommon focus and preparation, altering little between its time honing the material on small stages and hitting the studio months later. The group’s widely circulated demos, sold at early shows and included here on a separate disc, point at the same conclusion. *(continued)*

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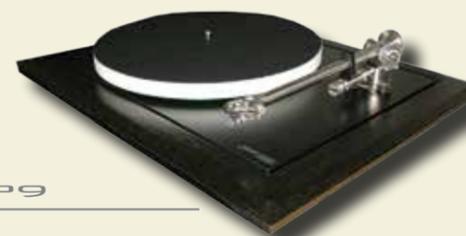
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August 2012 Paul Rigby, HI-FI World Magazine



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Public Enemy leader Chuck D pens the set's liner notes and invokes RATM's unusual pedigree and fortitude, too. Aside from the evolution of guitarist Tom Morello's solos, few of the band's blueprints undergo considerable modifications on the debut. The upshot of such an exacting work ethic translates via the foursome's combustible onstage performances, which take the vigorous agitprop to volatile levels surpassing those heard on the superbly recorded album. Compiled on two DVDs, and comprising an entire concert (June 2010 in London) as well as clips plucked from an assortment of career-spanning shows, live takes of call-to-arms anthems such as "Killing in the

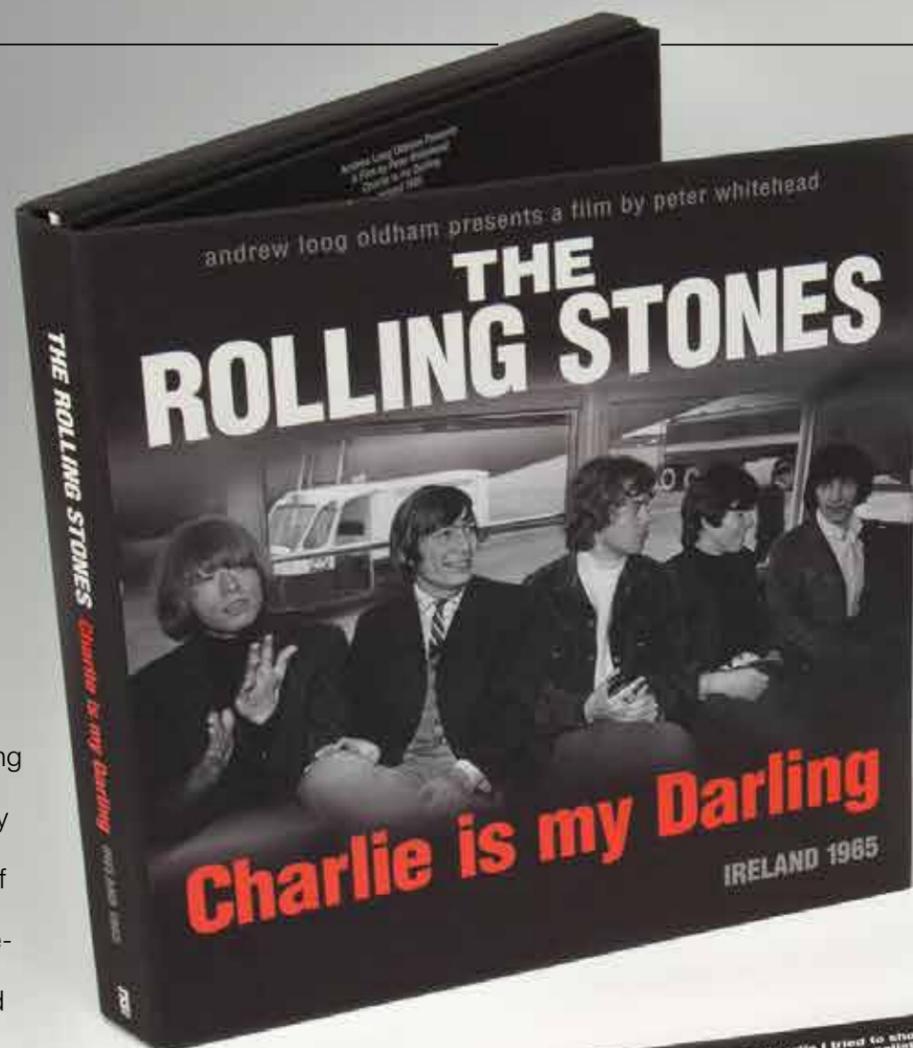
Name," "Freedom," and "Bulls on Parade" burst with powerhouse dynamics, bulldozing power, and animated passion.

The hypocrisies of multimillionaires urging rebellion via sloganeering lyrics notwithstanding, what counts is the incendiary music—a conflagration of metal, rock, punk, and hip-hop sent up with a cutthroat aggressiveness meant to tear down the corporate structures and oppressive regimes they rail against. The only reservations? Much of the content is previously released or readily available on Internet bootlegs. One also wishes the DVDs were Blu-rays, and the 40-page book more exhaustive.

S

tories surrounding the pandemonium at mid-1960s Rolling Stones shows are legion. Tales of fainting girls, brawling boys, and all-around screaming

and shoving mayhem inform the band's mystique. It's easy to believe the recollections are exaggerated for the sake of legend, yet as confirmed by this official albeit never-before-released film, the hysteria often spilled onstage and forced the band to quit before the shows finished.



Shot just weeks after "(I Can't Get No) Satisfaction" reached number one, *Charlie Is My Darling: Ireland 1965* is expanded from its original 35-minute length to a 65-minute peer into the lives of the Stones as they travel around Ireland, gather backstage, and cavort between concerts. Watching Mick Jagger and Keith Richards developing the song "Sitting on a Fence" while lounging in a motel room borders on the surreal. As does the duo's brief, playful, gently ribbing versions of Beatles songs, early pop standards, and Elvis numbers. Reflecting a deeper seriousness and raw explosiveness, live footage of tunes such as "The Last Time" and the group's cover of Chuck Berry's "Around and Around" crackle with tangible energy. The first-ever live rendition of "(I Can't Get No) Satisfaction"? It's here, too.

The film makes evident the materialization of a burgeoning countercultural movement and changing of the guard, and not just because of its portrayal of the amped-up performances (and invaluable shots of the manic crowds). Jagger's prescient interview responses, which include spot-on observations on American youth and pop songwriting up until the mid-1950s, prove equally revealing. Every member is interviewed; so, too, are ecstatic fans, and a priest that nearly lost his job after he was spotted at a concert.

Expanded with an array of goodies, the movie is presented in three restored versions on both DVD and Blu-ray. Two CDs—one a soundtrack, the other a captivating collection of 13 live tracks recorded during the 1965 tour (a program duplicated on the LP)—and a 42-page hardcover book fill the savvy package.



### Rolling Stones

*Charlie Is My Darling: Ireland 1965*  
ABKCO, 2 CDs/1 Blu-ray/1 DVD/2 LPs  
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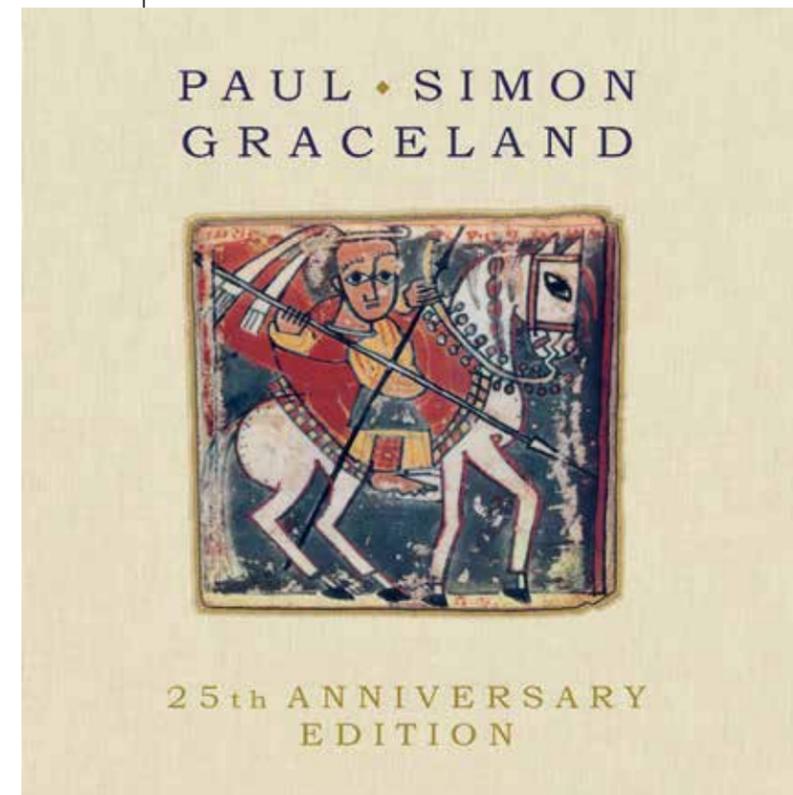
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## Paul Simon

*Graceland: 25th Anniversary Edition*  
Sony Legacy, 2 CDs/ 2 DVDs  
\$120

Since its 1986 release, Paul Simon's *Graceland* has led a double life. While other crossover albums preceded it, the record ignited interest in "world music" and turned the vague catchphrase into a trendy subgenre. Yet Simon's controversial methods—he circumvented a U.N. cultural boycott against South Africa, ignored the advice of experts, and recorded a majority of the songs in the country with South African musicians—have always tarnished the effort's accomplishments, which include two major Grammy Awards and inclusion in the United States National Recording Registry. *(continued)*

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- ✓ **Yes**, it's intuitive with user-friendly menus;
- ✓ **Yes**, ARC is included with every MRX.

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**MUSIC**

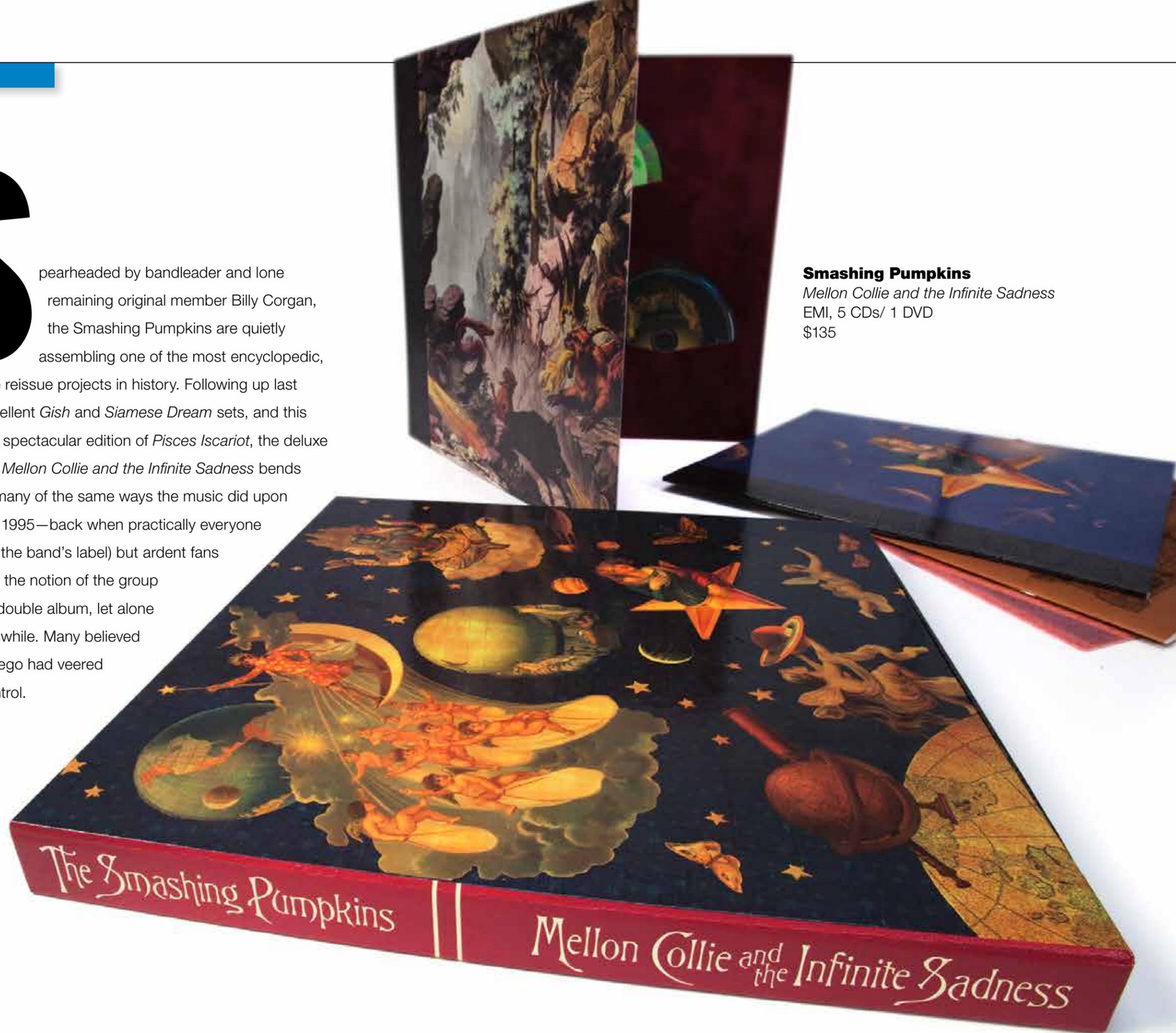


Joe Berlinger's *Under African Skies* documentary, the grand prize amidst the well-appointed crack-erjack box that is *Graceland: 25th Anniversary Edition*, confronts such issues and tries to put them to rest. Peter Gabriel, David Byrne, Paul McCartney, and Quincy Jones are among recognizable figures volunteering recollections and opinions; Simon's return to the country some 25 years later for a reunion concert provides a corollary backdrop. Anti-apartheid activists and leaders speaking about the extreme situations, divided reactions, and inherent contradictions regarding

the record suggest the tension—and Simon's somewhat selfish motives—may never be resolved. Which, Simon maintains, is why the music's ends justifies the means. Represented here on a superbly remastered CD along with a separate volume of bonus tracks, *Graceland* remains undeniably fresh. The exhilarating collision of contrasting harmonies and burbling, dance-inviting grooves engenders a joyousness, optimism, and transcendence intended to defeat the evils occurring in the cloistered environment in which the music was made. A second DVD

contains the film *The African Concert*, the visual register of an event blending Graceland songs with traditional South African tunes. Seen amidst ambassadors like Hugh Masekela, Miriam Makeba, and Ladysmith Black Mambazo, Simon is a mere mortal. Sony Legacy spares no expense in the packaging. Teeming with textured paper and cloth, and loaded with pertinent information and library-quality books, *Graceland: 25th Anniversary Edition* is exquisite. Analog fanatics will want to supplement it with the reference-quality LP.

**S**pearheaded by bandleader and lone remaining original member Billy Corgan, the Smashing Pumpkins are quietly assembling one of the most encyclopedic, immersive reissue projects in history. Following up last year's excellent *Gish* and *Siamese Dream* sets, and this summer's spectacular edition of *Pisces Iscariot*, the deluxe version of *Mellon Collie and the Infinite Sadness* bends minds in many of the same ways the music did upon release in 1995—back when practically everyone (including the band's label) but ardent fans scoffed at the notion of the group issuing a double album, let alone one worthwhile. Many believed Corgan's ego had veered out of control.



### Smashing Pumpkins

*Mellon Collie and the Infinite Sadness*  
EMI, 5 CDs/ 1 DVD  
\$135

Replete with the original record remastered and three CDs stuffed with dozens of previously unreleased tracks, this museum-level piece arrives in a magnetically sealed package adorned with beautiful, embossed cover art that extends the record's Georges Melies-inspired visual concepts. It all evokes adventure, fantasy, and exploration—just like the terrifically ambitious and fearlessly expansive music, which sounds even more impressive and vibrant today than it did nearly 20 years ago. The unburied archival treasures help place the extravagance, massiveness, and extremities of the finalized studio songs in context, and also reveal Corgan held back even more ideas, alternative arrangements, and tunes. The amount of material isn't what stuns; the across-the-board quality and imagination do, however—and do so consistently.

Akin to finding a curiosity-sparking heirloom dating from the early 1900s, or discovering for the first time the otherworldly odysseys inherent in a leather-bound volume of classic fiction, the outer box and one of the two inclusive books overflow with illustrations of angels, moons, exotic landscapes, and inventive animal characters that encourage further investigation. A second, expertly printed book contains lyrics. Corgan pens track-by-track liner notes, and a DVD documents a 1996 London concert as well as four extra performances. A velvet-lined gatefold disc holder and decoupage kit cap off 2012's best overall box set. ●



# TONE Audio Music Editor Bob Gendron's Top Rock and Pop Albums of 2012

## 1. Japandroids

*Celebration Rock*

## 2. Killer Mike

*R.A.P. Music*

## 3. Sharon Van Etten

*Tramp*

## 4. Kendrick Lamar

*Good Kid, m.A.A.d. City*

## 5. Ty Segall

*Slaughterhouse and Twins*  
(tie/combined)

## 6. Neil Young & Crazy Horse

*Americana and Psychedelic Pill*  
(tie/combined)

## 7. Justin Townes Earle

*Nothing's Going to Change the  
Way You Feel About Me Now*

## 8. Frank Ocean

*Channel Orange*

## 9. Baroness

*Yellow & Green*

## 10. Dr. John

*Locked Down*

## Rounding Out the Top 25

### —Honorable Mentions:

**Neneh Cherry** *The Cherry Thing*

**Dan Deacon** *America*

**Bob Dylan** *Tempest*

**EI-P** *Cancer 4 Cure*

**Father John Misty** *Fear Fun*

**Jamey Johnson** *Living for a Song:  
A Tribute to Hank Cochran*

**Men** *Open Your Heart*

**Miguel** *Kaleidoscope Dream*

**Bob Mould** *Silver Age*

**Passion Pit** *Gossamer*

**Redd Kross** *Researching the Blues*

**Santigold** *Master of My Make Believe*

**Tame Impala** *Lonerism*

**Corin Tucker Band** *Kill My Blues*

**Bobby Womack** *The Bravest Man in the Universe*

### Five Consistently Overrated Records:

**Bat for Lashes** *The Haunted Man*

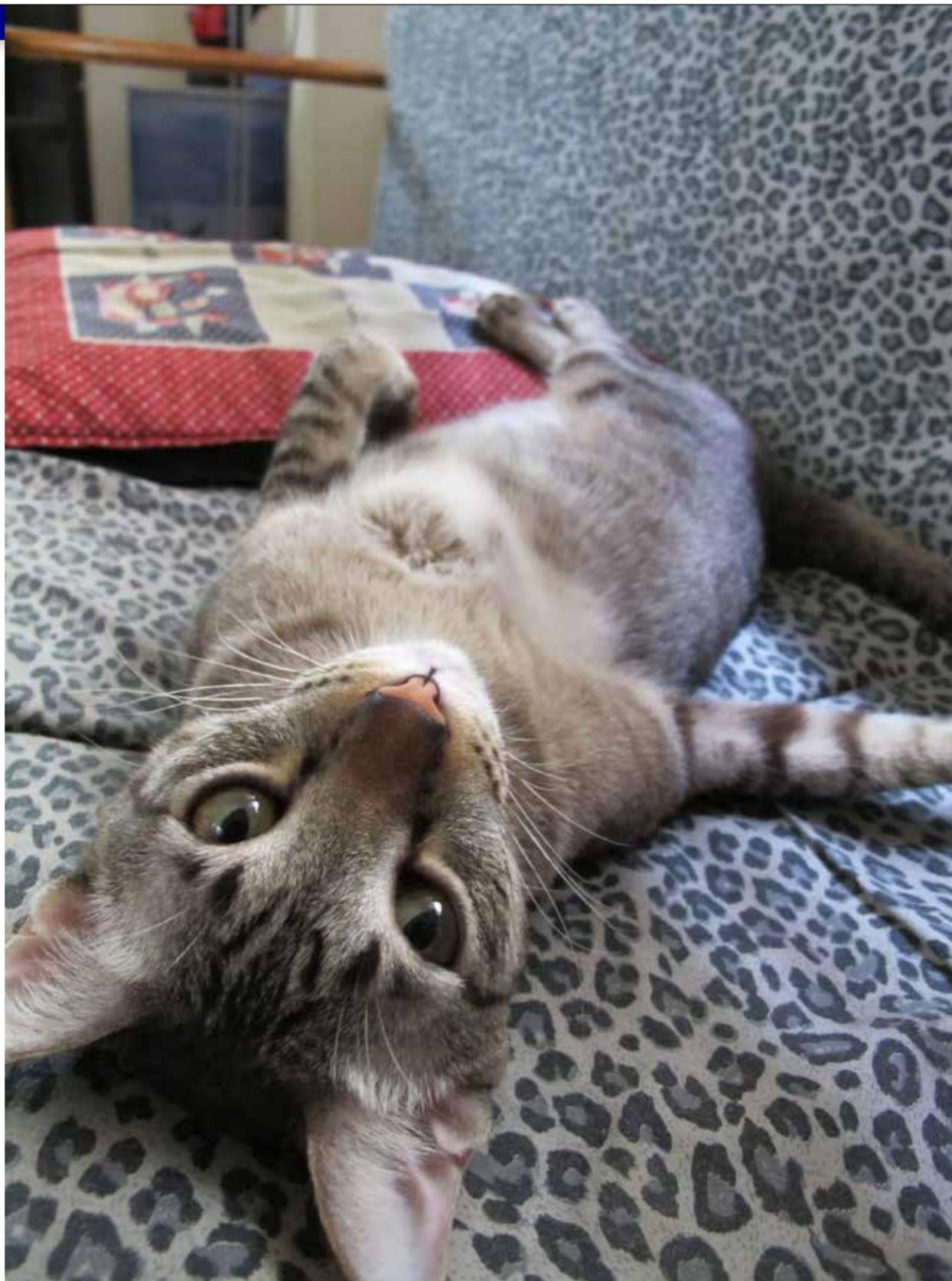
**Death Grips** *Money Store*

**Dirty Projectors** *Swing Lo Majellan*

**Godspeed You! Black Emperor**

*Allelujah! Don't Bend! Ascend!*

**Grimes** *Visions*



# Out of Tune With You

*When everything one knows about love and sex is learned from a pop song, is normalcy an impossibility?*

By Todd Martens

his column is being written four days after I found out my cat didn't have long to live. Those who aren't pet owners or aren't interested in reading an ode to a feline need not worry. I'll keep much of my mourning in my head and off of this page as few, I believe, are interested in how I haven't left the house, stopped going into work, and set up a sleeping bag on my bedroom floor so I can be closer to Pfeiffer when she sleeps under the bed.

There, it's out of my system. I almost feel guilty for sharing that. Not that I'm opposed to talking about myself, as this column attests. But I realize I shirk against any expression that seems to beg for human compassion and/or companionship. Likewise, I tend to not get terribly excited about the solitary combo of musician and acoustic guitar. I look to art to excite, to seduce, to make me laugh, and even to make me cry, but not, simply, to be human. Give me emotion that's exaggerated.

Rock n' roll isn't to blame for such an outlook. That would be a copout. But rock n' roll cleared a path for such avoidance, such selfishness. For as much as music is spoken about as a communal experience, obsessive fandom—if gone unwatched—breeds exclusion. It starts as an extension of self-expression. You can listen to Oasis, thought the teenaged version of myself, but the superior among us listen to Pulp, even if it means doing so alone, in our bedrooms, and with no one to talk to about it.

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Ultimately, the approach leads to this: "You don't want to date me," a girl I dated for a couple weeks said to me last month. "You want to date your anxieties."

Maybe. I write because it became obvious early on that being a rock star wasn't a viable option. Yet the validation I seek isn't all that different—adoration, largely anonymous, and at a distance. The girl gave me the aforementioned psychological analysis shortly after I refused to A.) walk barefoot on the beach (sand is gross, I said); and B.) declined to more closely inspect the weekly tradition that is the Venice Beach drum circle (drum circles are gross, I said). It made for a lousy date, but I was pleased to have a story to tell at the office the next morning. I knew a brief rant against the beach would generate a few chuckles, and I was formulating the story in my head over dinner with the girl.

Let's bring this back to cats. I once dated a girl—let's call her Misti—for five years. A month before she was scheduled to move in with me, I put a halt to it. She had a cat. I had a cat. I was nervous that my cat, Pfeiffer, wouldn't like a peer of her own species. Considering Pfeiffer was then 7 years old and her cat 12 years old, I said, helpfully I thought, "It may be too shocking for an elder cat to be placed in a new environment." She saw through it. "So you want to wait for my cat to die before we can live together."

I realize this example makes me look particularly bad, but it's also true that it can be applied to most aspects of my life. As a relatively anonymous teenager (I wasn't popular but I was never bullied or picked on, either) my identity was formed by things I liked—the music, movies, and video games that were "mine." I went out of my way to save up for Japanese-only Nintendo games, and I would gladly discuss how Green Day was okay for those unaware of the Smoking Popes.

I was also relieved, for instance, on my first date with Misti when she said that her favorite band was the Pixies. The Pixies were a gap in my knowledge, and I now wouldn't have to worry about the potential relationship, should it go bad, ruining things I liked. If it went bad, I wouldn't be losing nearly as much as I would have had our interests more overtly overlapped. My favorite songs, for example, would not be scarred by images of someone else. This all makes for a funny, *High Fidelity*-like aside, but it's ridiculous.

If you can't risk sharing a song with a loved one, you eventually go through everything, even grief, the same way you experience Wilco bootlegs: Alone, in your room, trying to connect with someone who largely exists only in your speakers. ●



**"It may be too shocking for an elder cat to be placed in a new environment." She saw through it. "So you want to wait for my cat to die before we can live together."**

**Arlene Schnitzer Hall**

Portland, Oregon

Text and Photos by  
Jeff Dorgay

**M**erely uttering the word “supergroup” makes most devout rock fans cringe, given they realize greatness seldom springs from bands often formed more frequently by marketing departments than musicians sharing a common desire to play together. It’s also tough not to be polarized about Sammy Hagar. You love or hate him from his Van Hagar days, remember or forget about his Red Rocker era, or simply recall him as the frontman for Montrose.

While Hagar doesn’t write the world’s deepest lyrics, he always brings a full bottle of tequila to the party and unfailingly gives 110% onstage. Joined by Chickenfoot members Joe Satriani on lead guitar, Michael Anthony on bass, and Kenny Aronoff (filling in for Chad Smith, on tour with the Red Hot Chili Peppers) on drums, Hagar currently claims a perfect support cast to achieve his aims. He also remains somebody with whom you’d want to share a drink. Or two.

# Chickenfoot

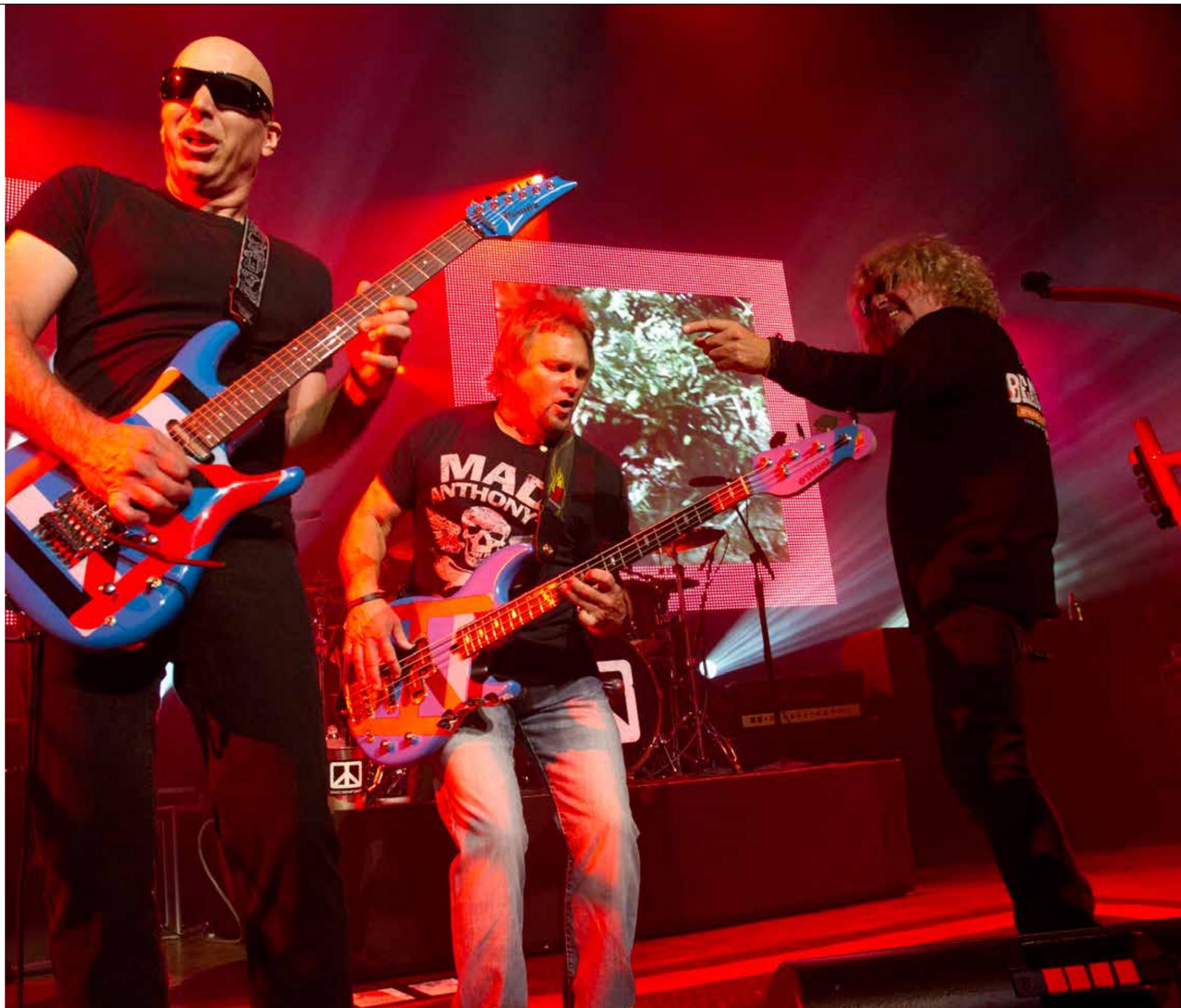


## CONCERT

Vide, fans from the VIP Meet and Greet clustered near the stage, where a woman told me she paid \$550 for the privilege and will do it again when the band plays Santa Barbara. "This is not like other meet and greets, where you see the band across the room. These guys make a point to hang out with you."

Displaying visible electricity, Hagar immediately lit up the stage like a fully charged Tesla coil, cutting a big swath as he bounded from one side to the other. Yet the singer never hogged the spotlight. Such chemistry is the secret to Chickenfoot's success; these guys genuinely seem to enjoy each other's company. No one gets lost in extended noodling and even Satriani, a virtuoso that in the past remained content to stay close to his wall of Marshall amps, stepped up to the microphone with regular frequency to contribute backing vocals.

But the biggest surprise stemmed from witnessing the liberation of Anthony. No longer in the background, or looked upon as a stepchild like when he was in Van Halen, he let loose with great bass riffs that were part rock, part fusion—and always heavy. His fingers ripped up and down the neck like those belonging to a lead guitarist. Unchained and giddy, he resembled a man recently let out of prison.



## CONCERT

Chickenfoot played at maximum intensity from start to finish, slowing only briefly for "Something Going Wrong" and the chance for Satriani to drag out his double neck. Before long, the tachometer resumed redline status on the band's ode to NASCAR, "Turnin' Left," as Hagar and Anthony leaped off the drum riser.

During the intro of "Last Temptation," Hagar reflected on the recent passing of his manager as well as several other musicians that expired over last few months. He proclaimed he's now approaching every show as if it's his last.

The conviction is admirable. Hagar is almost 65, but doesn't look a day over 40, and he belted out high notes as well as he did in his younger days. He's no slouch on guitar, either. Sure, he only pulled out his red Les Paul for "Oh Yeah," but it's obvious he's picked up a few tricks from having played with a number of rock's top guitarists.

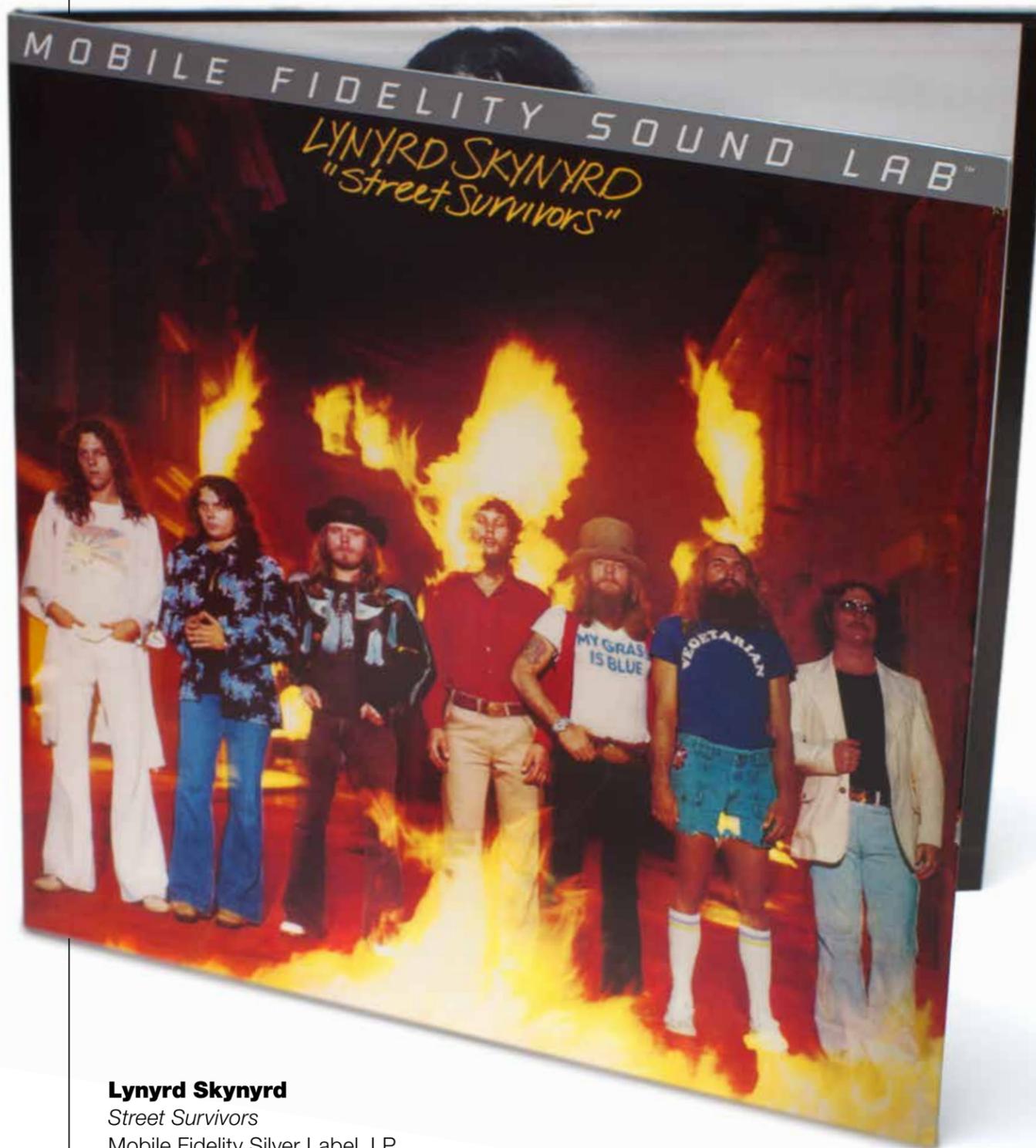
While the Rolling Stones once lamented the idea of playing "Satisfaction" when they were in their 40s, Hagar saved "Rock Candy" for the encore (dedicating it to fallen bandmate Ronnie Montrose) and relished every second of it. Perhaps his next bottling venture should be whatever keeps him looking this good. If so, he should sell a couple of cases to Mick and Keith. ●

# Audiophile Pressings

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## Lynyrd Skynyrd

**H**ow many times have you shouted, “Play some Skynyrd” at a lousy bar band? Better yet, how many times has this thought crossed your mind when you were subjected to another female vocal track demoed at a hi-fi show? Unfortunately, as much as you may love Lynyrd Skynyrd, most of the band’s albums are not mastered with much care. Flat, compressed, and grainy are the general rules. The recent Japanese/Universal pressings are most unrighteous.



**Lynyrd Skynyrd**  
*Street Survivors*  
 Mobile Fidelity Silver Label, LP

However, Mobile Fidelity again proves that “audiophile pressing” and “fun” can coexist on the same planet. And, it’s pretty awesome that the label includes the now-famous “flaming” cover originally limited to about 5000 copies after several members of the group were killed in an airplane crash only days after the record was released in 1977.

Instead of sounding like a veil is removed, the MoFi pressing is akin to hearing an entire shower curtain taken away, with every aspect of the record greatly improved. Lead singer Ronnie Van Zant is now way in front of the mix, and you can actually hear guitarist Steve Gaines right behind him. It all comes together on “That Smell” when Van Zant goes “Awwwwwww...” and seemingly fades out forever. The overplayed radio classic takes on new life.

Also, what’s the point of having three guitarists in a band if it all just sounds like one big, fat guitar in the final mix? While a bit of compression sneaks in now and then, it’s glorious to hear all three guitarists distinctly, all with their own individual space and tone. It’s like having a fishbowl full of guitars. Grab a second helping before you put this LP back in the jacket. —**Jeff Dorgay**



**Carole King**  
*Music*  
 Mobile Fidelity, 180g LP

Mobile Fidelity did a great job last year resurrecting Carole King's *Live At Carnegie Hall* double album. The reissue label backs it up with *Music*, mining major treasure from the early 70s master tape. While King's third album failed to match the 11-times platinum success of *Tapestry*, *Music* achieved gold status soon after its release. It also contains a handful of hits that were more successful for artists that later covered them than they were for King.

Using an early Ode copy for comparison reveals the original pressing possessing more sparkle on the top end, but more surface noise, too. Thanks to the MoFi edition's extra resolution, it's much easier to hear the expressiveness of King's voice and keyboard overdubs. Listeners with cartridges featuring a more romantic tonal balance might be a bit disappointed. My Koetsu Urushi Blue is too polite for this record, yet the more resolving Rega Apheta is suited to extracting every bit of detail. Both the original and remaster suffer from modest distortion lurking in the loudest passages. However, said offense is nowhere as egregious as that plaguing Joni Mitchell's *Court and Spark*. —**Jeff Dorgay**



**Weather Report**  
*Heavy Weather*  
 Original Recordings Group, 180g 45RPM 2LP

Arguably the jazz fusion band's best album, *Heavy Weather* is indisputably Weather Report's most commercially successful effort courtesy of the memorable song "Birdland," which in the late 70s could be found on a jukebox in just about every fern bar. This is also the Weather Report set on which bassist extraordinaire Jaco Pastorius became fully involved, writing two tracks and playing on all of them.

Columbia made some pretty grotty-sounding records during this era, and *Heavy Weather* is no exception. Many of the nuances are lost in the original, and my 1A/1B pressing feels like a brick-walled CD, with mids pushed up so far it feels like Wayne Shorter is playing his sax in my lap—quite unnerving. Lest we forget, this is when the loudness wars began, with record companies trying to get better sound in everyone's cars and on table radios.

ORG's pressing is silky smooth, the percussion is more listenable and handclaps natural, no longer sounding like someone beating a stick against a wall. Shorter returns to playing with the band, and overall balance is restored. The added dynamics gleaned from spreading the recording out onto a pair of 45RPM discs brings out new feelings of excitement. Pastorius' bass riffs snarl with authority, Shorter's sax flows through the soundstage, and the rest of the players' contributions disclose the presence of a spaciousness this recording never had before. Another triumph from ORG. —**Jeff Dorgay**

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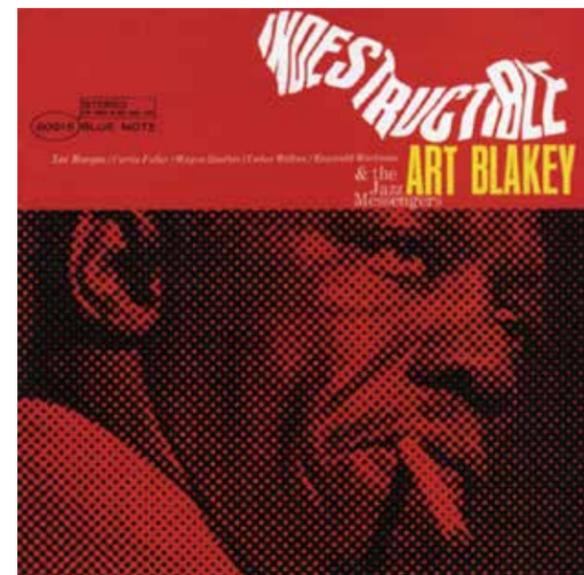
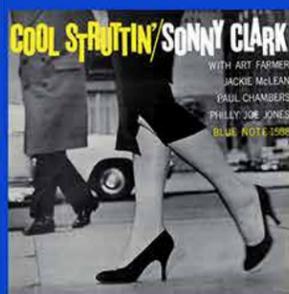
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## Art Blakey & the Jazz Messengers

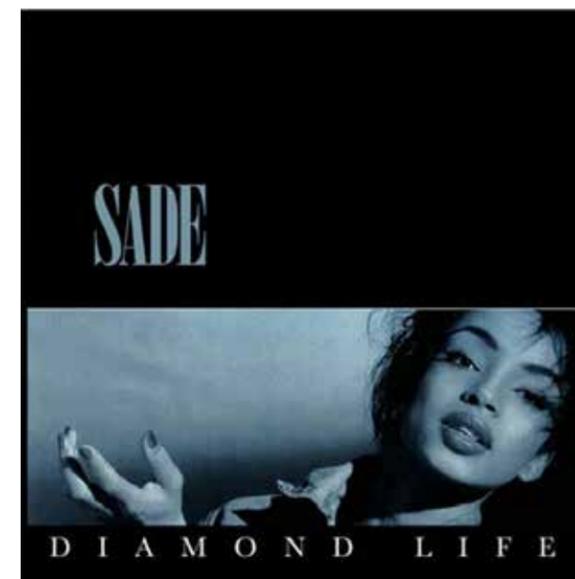
*Indestructible*

Music Matters, 180g 45RPM 2LP

**D**amn! This record is what bop is all about. The early Blue Notes don't capture it and the Rudy Van Gelder CD remasters squelch it. "The Egyptian" gets to business right away, taking up the first side of this two-record set.

More than one engineer has stated that percussive impact is tough to capture, but it's perfection here. Art Blakey authoritatively slams down his drumsticks on the side of his kit and you can feel the resonance as they bounce off the rim. Meanwhile, Lee Morgan, Curtis Fuller, and Wayne Shorter battle for the limelight, each coming to the front of the stage, then stepping back while the other prepares to take a shot. And that's just the opening cut.

The sonics are larger than life, with Blakey keeping rock-solid time, the glue holding the band together. Surfaces are dead-quiet, yet full of life. Yes, it's hard to believe these records were made from tapes now more than 50 years old. Music Matters continues to set the jazz standard for aural bliss. —**Jeff Dorgay**



## Sade

*Diamond Life*

Audio Fidelity, 180g LP

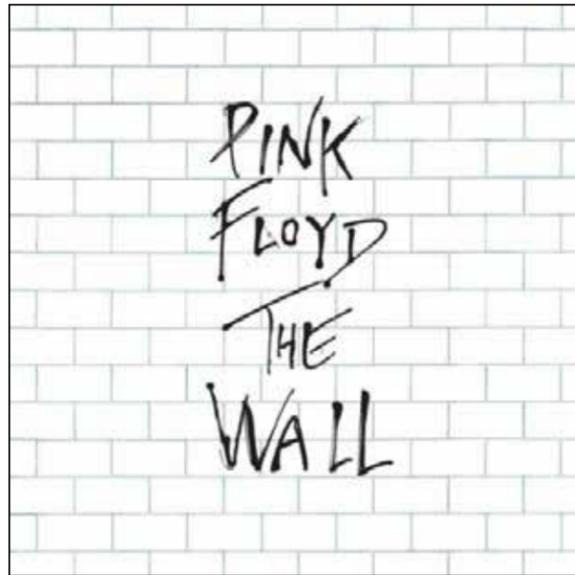
**S**ade's debut was all the rage in 1985, grabbing major MTV airplay as well as time on popular and jazz radio stations. Lead singer Sade Adu combined a soulful sound and sexy demeanor to the tune of six-times platinum.

Kevin Gray at Coherent Mastering took the helm here, and eliminated about half of the original's top-end crunchiness. Fortunately, this Audio Fidelity reissue possesses a considerably wider soundstage. The original keeps percussion bits and keyboard fills tightly wrapped towards the center of the speakers, while the presentation here is more relaxed, with low-level details more ethereal. The intro to "Why Can't We Live Together" is the best cut on the record, with bongos bouncing back and forth beyond the speaker boundaries, and the bass line locked in place as Adu's voice wafts up from the silence.

Interestingly, there's a much greater sense of vertical dimensionality in the new pressing. The original rendition of Adu's voice is more diffuse; here, her voice feels right at microphone height. And the remaining audiophile boxes are properly ticked. My pressing is free of clicks and pops, has a much lower noise floor, and features an exquisitely printed gatefold cover. A very worthwhile addition to any record collection. —**Jeff Dorgay**



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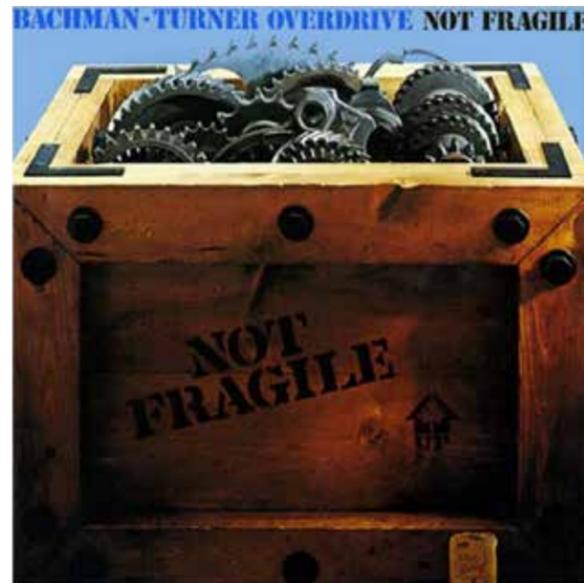


### Pink Floyd

*The Wall*  
EMI, 180g 2LP

The final chapter in the major Pink Floyd remasters trilogy is the best. While the analog remasters of *Dark Side of the Moon* and *Wish You Were Here* are okay, they don't come close to the early-stamper British, German, and Japanese pressings.

Unquestionably, the rare pressings remain tops, yet they're insanely collectible and accordingly priced. Collector wonks will turn up their noses, but this is *The Wall* for the rest of us. If you'd like a significantly better edition than what's available for \$10-\$20, get on board. Anyone new to vinyl will be shocked at how much better it sounds than any CD version, even on a modest turntable. —**Jeff Dorgay**



### Bachman-Turner Overdrive

*Not Fragile*  
Audio Fidelity, Gold CD

BTO's third album, *Not Fragile*, showcases the Canadian rockers at their peak before they succumbed to Spinal Tap-like player changes and arguments. Lending his signature "breath of life" to the arena-rock classic, Steve Hoffman gives this CD reissue a much-needed push in the direction of the original analog LP, augmented with an overall warmth resembling the DCC series for which he's known.

Pulling an early Mercury pressing from my record collection reveals the original LP to be fairly lively, but the standard CD is awfully compressed. The Audio Fidelity disc goes miles better, separating the guitars of the brothers Bachman and giving the music a semblance of depth and smoother high end. Bass warmth and texture are substantially improved, and best showcased on "Rock Is My Life" with a rich, fat sound and hefty decay.

Whether this disc stands the test of time where the rubber meets the road. A clean original LP can be had in most used record stores for about \$3. But if you are a diehard digital and BTO fan, let it roll. —**Jeff Dorgay**

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### **The Decca Sound**

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**De Falla:** *The Three-Cornered Hat/La Vida Breve* (Ansermet/Orchestre de la Suisse Romande)

**Rachmaninoff:** *Piano Concerto No. 3 in D Minor* (Ashkenazy/Fistoulari/London Symphony Orchestra)

**Respighi:** *Feste Romane/Pini di Roma* (Maazel/Cleveland Orchestra)

**Wagner:** *The Golden Ring* (Various soloists/Solti/Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra)

**Messaien:** *Turangalila –Symphonie* (Chailly/Thibaudet/Harada/Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra)

**Beethoven:** *Violin Concerto in D Major*; **Britten:** *Violin Concerto* (Jansen/Jaarvi/Die Deutsche Kammerphilharmonie Bremen/London Symphony Orchestra)

More than 50 years ago, Decca, the renowned UK recording company, ushered in the stereophonic era with its trademark “FFSS” (or “full frequency spectrum sound”) classical LPs. *The Decca Sound* is a limited-edition box of six LP reissues selected for their outstanding performances and, well, their sound. Unlike the 140g British-stamped predecessors, these new 180g vinyl heavyweights are minted in Czechoslovakia. Four are analog recordings, while two stem from digital originals and make their vinyl debut. A souvenir booklet on Decca’s fascinating history of making great recordings completes the box.

The oldest analog recording, *The Golden Ring*, offers well-known excerpts from Wagner’s operatic ring cycle performed by Sir Georg Solti and the Vienna Philharmonic. I’m immediately struck by the record’s silent surfaces (never one of Decca’s strong points) and brilliant, bright, orchestral sound. The final scene of *Das Rheingold*, complete with anvil splitting and the gods’ entry into Valhalla, conveys the huge soundstage and dynamic range achieved by producer John Culshaw and his studio magicians. Remember, this excerpt was taped in 1958.

The excellent sonic signature is consistently maintained throughout the other analog recordings. Ernest Ansermet and his Orchestre de la Suisse

Romande give a pulse-pounding rendition of de Falla’s *Three-Cornered Hat* featuring authentic Flamenco effects. Rachmaninoff’s *Third Piano Concerto*, played by Vladimir Ashkenazy and sympathetically supported by maestro Anatole Fistoulari and the London Symphony Orchestra, is as good a reading as this romantic work gets. There is nigh-perfect balance between piano and orchestra; listen to the heart-on-a-sleeve second movement adagio. The LP also sports the most natural sound balance of the bunch. The final analog entry showcases Lorin Maazel and the Cleveland Orchestra delivering two Respighi blockbusters, *The Pines of Rome* and *Roman Festivals*. These evocative images of ancient and modern Rome generate a massive wall of sound without swamping excellent instrumental details. Superb handling of the dynamic extremes rightly earns the LP perennial audiophile-favorite status.

When Decca went to all-digital recording consoles in the 1980s, it continued to issue LPs cut from digital masters. However, newer technology never guarantees better sound, and many early digital-era LPs suffer from excessive glare, a trait shared by their CD counterparts. Fortunately, the news is better concerning the two digitally sourced LPs here. Riccardo Chailly and the Concertgebouw Orchestra generate a hell-for-

leather rendering of Messaien’s massive *Turangalila Symphony*, with strong contributions from piano virtuoso Jean-Yves Thibaudet. Young violin star Janine Jansen’s takes on Beethoven’s warhorse concerto and Britten’s modern classic hold their own against stiff competition.

In comparing the contents of the box to the original LPs of the analog recordings and to the CDs of the digital editions, the analog reissues are reasonably accurate facsimiles of the originals. However, their much quieter surfaces enable more detail to come through. The digitally sourced LPs improve upon the previous CD releases in terms of warmth and ambience.

Limited-edition deluxe box sets are all-or-nothing propositions. Should classical lovers drop more than \$100 on *The Decca Sound*? On the basis of the four analog recordings alone, yes. If you don’t have the originals, you would have to shell out far more money to get pristine first-stamper pressings. And even if you already own the original records, they’re not “heavy” vinyl or don’t possess noise-free surfaces. Besides, all of these records offer head-of-the-list performances of works that should be in every classical library.

—Lawrence Devoe

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## Miles Davis

*Friday and Saturday Nights: In Person*  
*At the Blackhawk, San Francisco*  
Impex Records, 180g 2LP

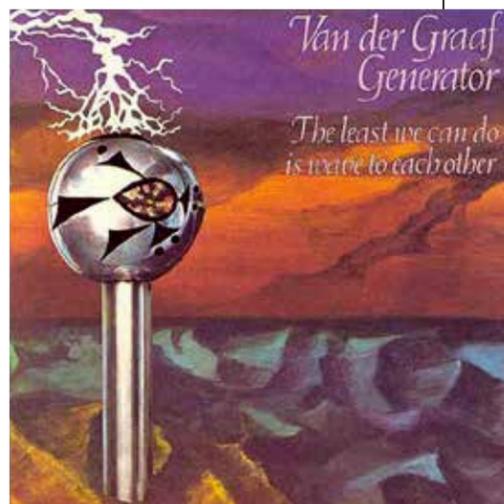
# Miles Davis

Originally recorded at the legendary Blackhawk club in San Francisco on April 21 and 22, 1961, this two-record set captures Miles Davis at an interesting crossroads. Transitioning from the band that produced *Sketches of Spain*, Davis pairs here with players that would be featured on his following studio album, *Someday My Prince Will Come*, released in the fall of 1961.

Davis once said he could assemble the ultimate rock n' roll band, and this effort definitely rocks. The performances are spectacular—and the recording quality equally worthy. The Blackhawk was known for great sound, and the Impex pressing does not disappoint. Via a wide stereo image, Davis' quintet spreads across the room in lifelike fashion. Kevin Gray takes charge of mastering duties, and if you've been subscribing to Music Matters' jazz series, you know Gray's track record. LP surfaces are unblemished and perfectly quiet. There's no hint of groove distortion, even in the loudest passages. The natural timbre may fool you into thinking you are sitting at the Blackhawk, glass of whiskey in hand.

Impex does everything right, from the glossy jacket to the period record label and killer sound. Let's hope the imprint produces more Columbia titles in this fashion. If you only have the CDs of this masterwork, you owe it to yourself to hear the music as it should be experienced.

—Jeff Dorgay



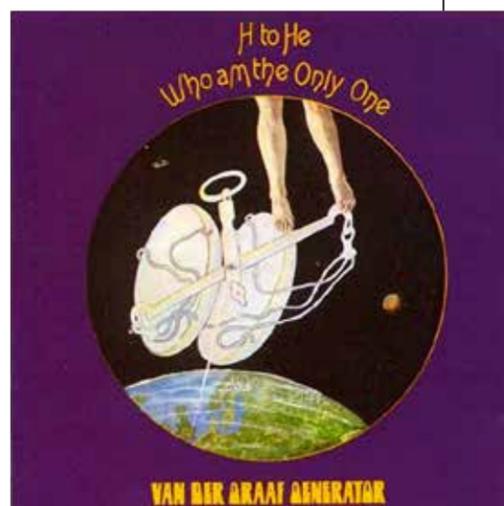
### Van Der Graaf Generator

*The Least We Can Do Is Wave To Each Other*  
*H to He: Who Am The Only One*  
*Pawn Hearts*  
 Four Men With Beards, 180g LP

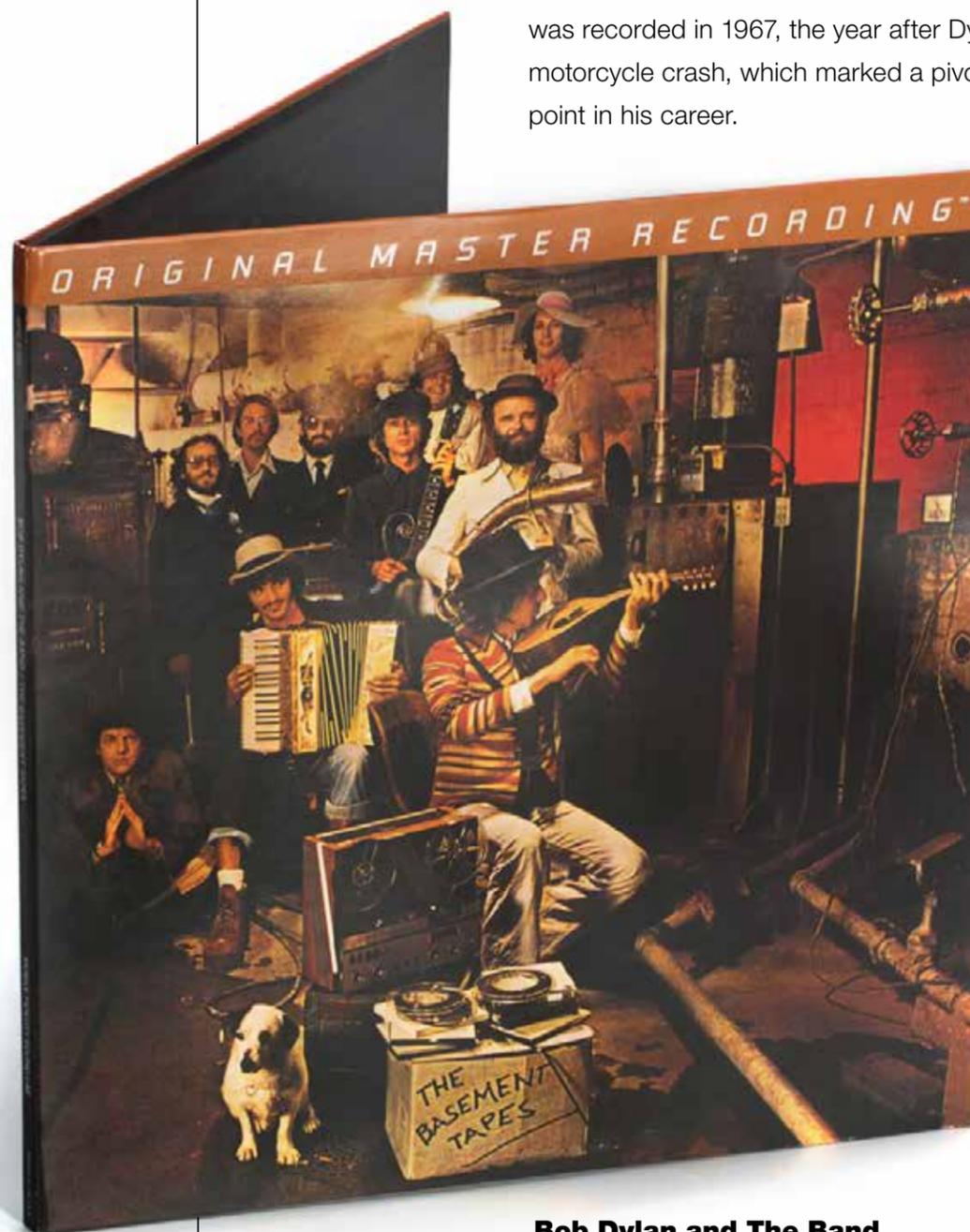
Prog lovers rejoice! Four Men With Beards label does a super-freaky job with these genre cornerstones. *TONE*'s resident prog maniac says the original British pressings represent the pinnacle, yet even if you can find them, they run from \$200-\$350. And the remastered CDs are but mere sonic carcasses of these complex recordings.

Keeping the 4 Men With Beards' underground vibe, there's no mastering information listed. For that matter, 4MWB doesn't even have a Web site, meaning it's impossible to know what tapes were utilized. However, these three albums have an equally high quality level—with very quiet surfaces, and overall sound quality that makes it tough to discern if they were made with high-quality digital masters or original analog masters. Considering they hail from 1970-1971, anything is possible.

All three LPs feature a vast soundstage that practically wraps around your head, with plenty of ping-pong stereo effects throughout. Compression is kept to a minimum, and the recordings feel uncluttered and spacious, with a smooth high end. Better-than-average printing remains true to the original artwork, and the \$18 price is a bargain.  
 —Jeff Dorgay



Volumes are written about this famous album, celebrating the collaboration of Bob Dylan and his backing band, the Hawks, whose members ended up becoming The Band. Not officially released until the summer of 1975, the set was recorded in 1967, the year after Dylan's motorcycle crash, which marked a pivotal point in his career.



### Bob Dylan and The Band

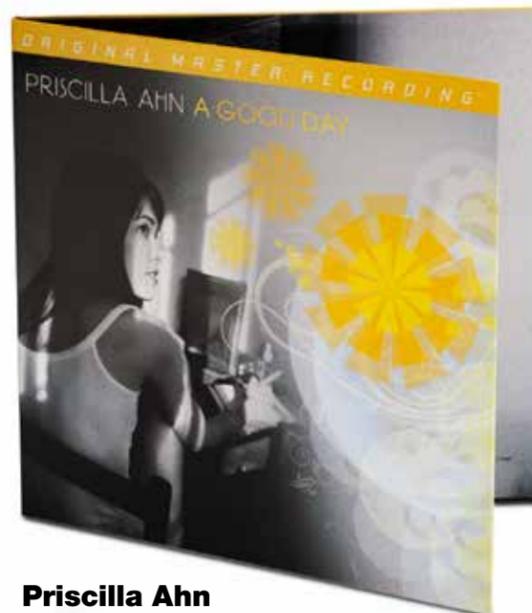
*The Basement Tapes*  
 Mobile Fidelity, 180g 2LP

In a 1969 interview, the Bard told *Rolling Stone* publisher Jann Wenner: “[This is] really the way to do a recording—in a peaceful, relaxed setting—in somebody’s basement. With the windows open...and a dog lying on the floor.” The mellow vibe certainly comes through in the presentation.

Mobile Fidelity’s reissue features much richer timbres and dynamics than the original. But remember Dylan’s comment about being relaxed. While it’s still crackly in parts, occasionally sounding like it was produced on the Revox A77 tape recorder shown on the album cover, overall quality is very high, particularly given the stripped-down environment in which the record was captured—essentially, Dylan’s basement, concrete walls and all. Where the original is consistently flat, lacking air and decay, the new pressing comes alive.

Sure, various members of the Band, and even Dylan himself, are still not in agreement about what tracks should have been (or not been) included on the Columbia release. Debates aside, it’s a phenomenal time capsule, a stellar collection of songs.

And there’s more Dylan coming from the Chicago-based audiophile imprint. Josh Bizar, Mobile Fidelity’s Director of Sales and Marketing, says, “*The Basement Tapes* is one of the most important releases in our history and the perfect title to start the Mobile Fidelity Bob Dylan series.” We anxiously anticipate all of them. —Jeff Dorgay



**Priscilla Ahn**  
*A Good Day*  
Mobile Fidelity, 180g LP

**P**ut those Patricia Barber and Eva Cassidy albums away, and give something else a try. For those unwilling to forgo female vocalists as part of their audiophile heaven, Priscilla Ahn's debut is a good way to expand your repertoire.

Issuing the album on LP for the first time, Mobile Fidelity strips away the merciless compression present on the CD and leaves Ahn unsquashed. The perky, Pokemon-esque singer paints a rosy soundscape, with arrangements often resembling those of *It's a Beautiful Day*. Ahn's purity of tone and delicate phrasing should make vocal aficionados swoon, and while the top end crushes that of the digital version, it's still slightly on the hot side. This one will undoubtedly score more points with the vintage tube crowd than those that own ultra-resolving systems.

Another bonus: The pressing includes three bonus tracks not on the original CD. Keeping in character with the rest of the album, yet more sparsely arranged, they possess fairly little dynamic range, allowing seven tracks to fit on a side without compromising fidelity. —**Jeff Dorgay**



**Roberta Flack & Donny Hathaway**  
*Roberta Flack & Donny Hathaway*  
HD Tracks, 24/96 Download

**H**igh-resolution downloads remain crapshoots: some are brilliant, others a major disappointment. HD Tracks does a fantastic job invigorating this R&B classic, bringing to life, perhaps for the first time, the music at it should be experienced. Listeners that only own the CD may feel as if a blanket is lifted from the speakers, with the original version's AM-radio compression gone.

The 24/96 file also bests my LP, with the soundstage opened up in all dimensions. Cue up the mega-hit "Where is the Love" to experience Roberta Flack's voice to the fullest, predominantly in the left channel, with Hathaway mixed directly behind her in the right. Whereas the vocals previously felt mono, they now possess plenty of body. You can also clearly hear bleed-through from both singers' microphones.

Moreover, while the full complement of strings and percussion plod through on the LP (and are nearly unlistenable on CD), here, they take on a life of their own, with the crunchy drums replaced by natural timbre and extension. Great stuff.

—**Jeff Dorgay**



**Al DiMeola, John McLaughlin,  
and Paco de Lucia**

*Friday Night in San Francisco*  
ORG, 180g 45RPM 2LP

**R**ecorded in December of 1980 at San Francisco's Warfield Theater, these three mega guitarists convened to create one of history's most memorable acoustic-guitar records. Five of the seven tracks are duos, and the final two feature the trio. Bernie Grundman, the original mastering engineer, returns for remastering duties on this sweet ORG pressing. All the compression in my 1A original is swept away; spreading the music over two discs yields myriad benefits.

If there was ever an acoustic disc that encourages you to crank the volume, this is it. When the applause swells up at the end of songs, it's easy to close your eyes and be transported to that magical winter evening. Every nuance gets captured; every toe tap, every whack of the guitar body comes alive, and if your system is up to snuff, these guys sound as if they are right in the room. You can almost hear the guitar strings picking up weight as they become coated with sweat as the performance progresses.

The most exciting aspect of this recording, now restored to full brilliance? A toss-up between the rapid attack of the players' blazing speed and the low-level detail in the quietest passages. It's a shame unreleased material couldn't be included; this legendary evening begs for bonus tracks. —**Jeff Dorgay**

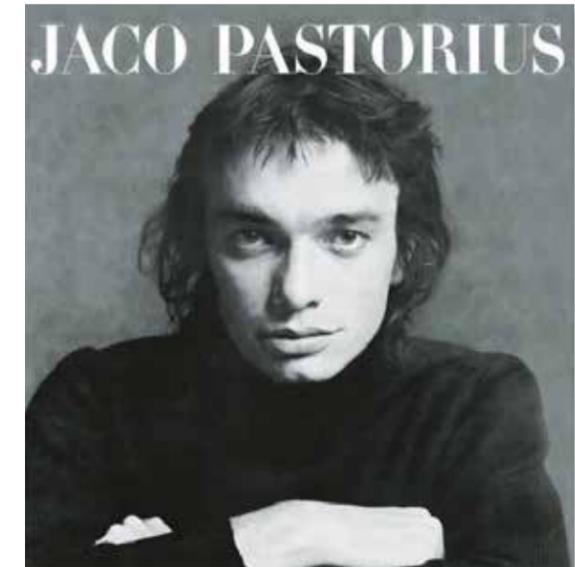


**Anne Bisson**

*Blue Mind*  
Fidelio, 180g LP

**F**or anyone that believes great vinyl can't be pressed from a digital master, look no further than Anne Bisson's *Blue Mind*, recorded live with minimal overdubs (only one track, "Dragonfly" features overdubbing) at Reference Studio in Saint-Calixte, Quebec. Vacuum-tube Neumann microphones contribute greatly to the pressing's enormous, breathy sound.

Bisson breaks no new stylistic or artistic ground, but she keeps the tunes upbeat. Drummer Paul Brochu and bassist Normand Guilbeault helm sparse arrangements that aid in accentuating her fluid voice. Fidelio brilliantly captures this essence, with Kevin Gray extracting every last ounce of dynamic range on LP. The result? It sounds like a master tape. Count on hearing this gem in many rooms at upcoming hi-fi shows. —**Jeff Dorgay**



**Jaco Pastorius**

*Jaco Pastorius*  
ORG, 180g 45RPM 2LP

**O**riginally produced in 1976, arguably when records pressed at Columbia were at their sonic worst, this record now finds its volatile tracks split onto a pair of LPs. What a difference. Spinning *Jaco Pastorius* at 45RPM rules.

Released at the beginning of the instrumentalist's tenure with Weather Report, the record includes heavy hitters Lenny White, Herbie Hancock, and Wayne Shorter, to name a few. The mix is not straight-ahead jazz, but it's not fully locked into fusion, either. Some pieces sound like they could have been culled from the outtakes of Hancock's *Blow Up* sessions.

Bernie Grundman takes the production helm here and fully utilizes his lifetime of jazz-related experience to give this masterpiece the attention it deserves. Pastorius' bass is finely depicted, his parts effortlessly gliding through the soundstage. Hancock's piano soars, liberated from the sonic grunge of the original. My speakers can barely contain this record!

Note: To naysayers claiming today's remasters lack the vitality of the original recordings, grab this record now and await pleasant discoveries. —**Jeff Dorgay**



### Traffic

*John Barleycorn Must Die*  
HD Tracks, 24/192 download

I am uncertain sure where this version of *John Barleycorn Must Die* was sourced, but it certainly came nothing near an analog tape. It sounds decidedly flat and lifeless. A quick comparison to a pink Island original will have you running back to your turntable. And interestingly, even though this title commands a premium price—as do all 24/192 titles at HD Tracks—one of the songs is upsampled from 24/96. (Note: There's no skulduggery on the company's part; HD Tracks makes it known in the album information section.)

However, even the recent Deluxe Edition CD remaster dances all over the high-res file in terms of instrument placement and soundfield size. The CD has the woodblock, flute, and triangle firmly planted to the left and right; on the hi-res file, the presentation is diffuse. Considering an excellent copy of the record can be had on vinyl for \$40-60, this download is not recommended.

—Jeff Dorgay



### The Band

*Music From Big Pink*  
Mobile Fidelity, 180g LP

The analog edition of this eminent rock recording follows Mobile Fidelity's successful SACD release of the same title and raises the bar even higher. A groundbreaking album that combines a wide range of styles and influences, it came after the Band toured with Bob Dylan and recorded *The Basement Tapes* (reviewed last issue).

TONEAudio collector Tom Caselli says the original black-label Capitol is an excellent original pressing. However, it is tough to find a copy that isn't warped. EMI's 100th Anniversary 180g pressing is rarer and equally good, but great-condition copies now command upwards of \$100.

Here, \$30 buys you a Super Big Gulp of extra creamy analog. Levon Helm's drumming, while somewhat subdued, is rich with texture in a way that few digital recordings manage to capture. Multi-part harmonies dominate and come alive across the soundstage, bringing us back to a time in recording history before massive overdubs became the norm. All of which explains why this record stands the test of time, earning the 34th spot on *Rolling Stone's* greatest albums of all-time list. —Jeff Dorgay



### The Best Coast

*The Only Place*  
HD Tracks, 24/96 Download

While you can read our full review of this album in Issue 46—Todd Martens does a fantastic job covering the feel of the record—I'm happy to report that the sound quality of the LP is very good. I'm even happier to squelch the thought that there's "no good music being produced today" and that "it all sounds terrible." Please, shut the hell up with that nonsense.

If you're a Best Coast fan and have a system capable of 24/96 playback, this record stands as a perfect example of why stamping a slab of vinyl from a digital master isn't always the way to go. When comparing the vinyl and hi-res download, the latter gets the nod for several reasons. First, the download sports a much stronger low end, which lends itself to the music's foot-stomping vibe. Second, there's a lot more space around lead singer Bethany Cosentino's voice and dreamy, twangy guitars. The download is clearer from top to bottom with, dare I say it, a more analog feel.

Let's hope HD Tracks comes up with more current records like this in its catalog.  
—Jeff Dorgay



### Billy Joel

*The Stranger*  
Mobile Fidelity, Hybrid SACD

Sure, some "Columbia crunchiness" pervades the upper registers. Yet Mobile Fidelity did an excellent job on this classic 70s album, part of its ongoing Billy Joel series.

The label unlocks more low-level detail on this record, which was horribly compressed for radio airplay. The opening track, "Movin' Out," feels slightly flat, but the remainder of the program possesses a more relaxed feel. By contrast, the standard-issue CD is horribly flat and harsh. Now, you can immediately hear the increased soundstage width; that on the original sounds like the band is trying to win one of those contests where they see how many people can stuff themselves inside a Volkswagen. This version sounds more like musicians playing in a real space.

Joel's piano, too, sounds revitalized. Throughout, there's more ambience to his playing. It now comes across as if he's playing a big-boy piano, and the reverb on the vocal tracks is also evident. "Vienna" and "She's Always a Woman" have newfound delicacy, and the 10cc-like backup singing on the title track reveals just how much craftsmanship actually got lost in the airwaves on the way to our car radios.

Whether *The Stranger* is a guilty pleasure or a time-worn friend, it sounds better than ever. —Jeff Dorgay



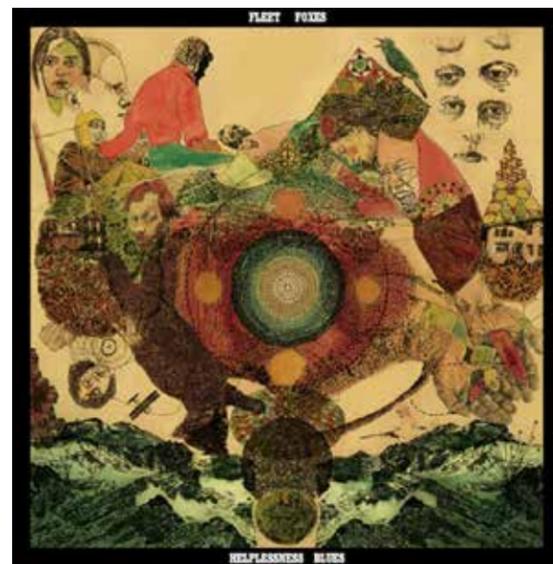
### Billy Joel

*Piano Man*  
Mobile Fidelity, 180g LP

If you're looking for an ideal example of the wealth of information available in a record's grooves versus a high-resolution digital file, this is it. I favorably reviewed the SACD of this set several issues ago, yet the LP uncovers far more sonic treasures.

The additional layers of texture, echo, and spaciousness in the oft-played title track are revelatory. It feels as if MoFi even captures the smokiness conveyed in the tune; such is the degree of piano texture available on this analog version.

—Jeff Dorgay



### Fleet Foxes

*Helplessness Blues*  
HD Tracks 24/96 download

Bummer: One of 2011's most popular vinyl releases—not to mention one of the year's best albums—sounds incredibly disappointing as a high-resolution download. The standard Sub Pop LP remains the way to roll, offering a more inviting midrange, even if it and the high-res file are equally bright up on top.

Sure, the high-res option musters a bit more dynamic contrast than the free 320kb/sec MP3 download, but not by much, and neither the vinyl nor the 24/96 are paragons of audiophile quality. —Jeff Dorgay

## Introducing VIVALDI



It's almost unfair;  
*dCS* seem to play in  
a league of their own.

STEREOPHILE

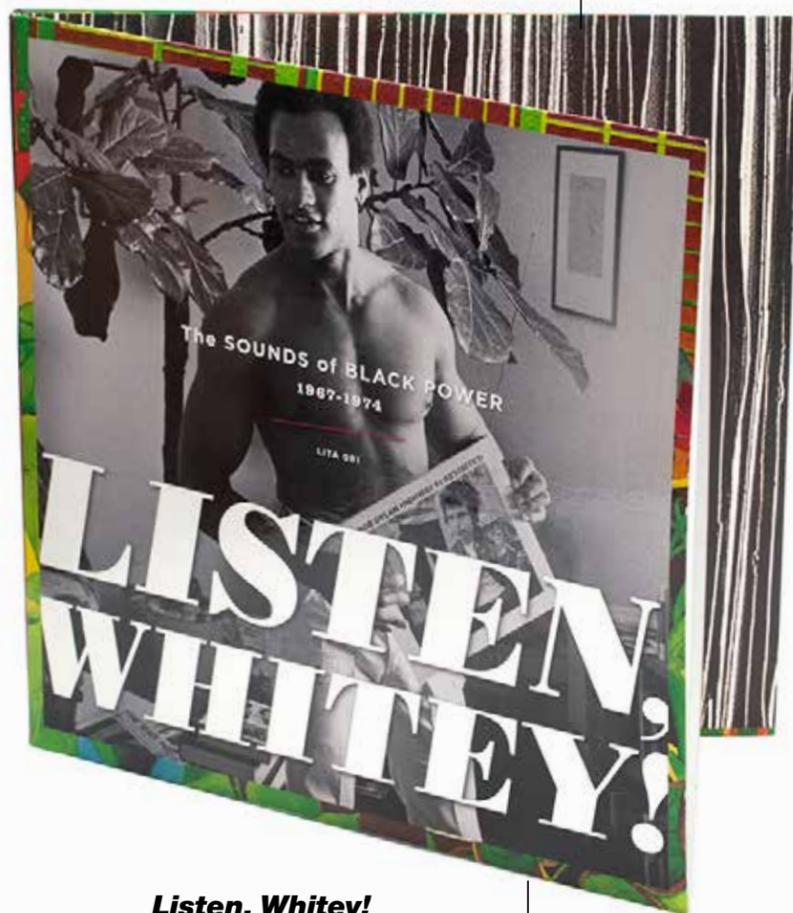


Vivaldi redefines state-of-the-art in digital playback and represents the pinnacle of our 'no compromise' approach to product design – setting a new standard for the future of digital audio.

*dCS* Vivaldi is a complete digital playback system that offers unmatched sonic and measured performance.

Designed for maximum flexibility with an array of input and output configurations it is easily set up and optimised for music systems with various digital sources.

Featuring the latest groundbreaking technology from *dCS*, Vivaldi will transform your listening experience, taking your music collection to levels you have not heard before.



**Listen, Whitey!**  
**The Sounds of Black**  
**Power 1967-1974**

Light in the Attic Records

## *Listen, Whitey!*

is the musical compilation to the book of the same title, written by Pat Thomas and produced by Fantagraphics Books. If the record intrigues you, the book contains 250 illustrations of albums and 45s I'm guessing you've probably never seen, all of which tell of the trials and tribulations that made this era such an incendiary period in US history.

Beginning with Shahid Quintet's "Invitation to Black Power," which sounds a lot like Gil Scott-Heron's "The Revolution Will Not Be Televised," we are given the basic hierarchy of how to get things done, perhaps in a somewhat stealthy matter, as the song asks, "How much black power can you hold in a can?"—referring to black unity in terms of gasoline bombs. This is serious shit. And it gets better as the four sides unfold.

While not an audiophile pressing per se, given many of the tracks on this two-record set have never seen the light of day on CD, or been remastered to LP, the overall sound quality is very good. Light in the Attic did a fantastic job at unearthing these treasures. Most importantly, there's unmistakable passion in this music, reminding us where we've been and just how far we still need to go.

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### Kiss

*Destroyer (Resurrected)*

HD Tracks 24/96 download or Universal LP

**K**iss never brought the fervor of its live shows to the studio, but on its fourth album, *Destroyer*, the quartet came close. Six months after the legendary *Alive!*, the band is at the top of the world and at one of its highest creative peaks. All of the songs on *Destroyer* are solid, and the record delivered four memorable singles.

“Detroit Rock City” and “Flaming Youth” remained favorites for years to come, and “Shout it out Loud” took the place of “Rock and Roll All Nite” as the collective’s then-major anthem. The piano ballad “Beth” took everyone by surprise. For this budding audiophile, in 1976, *Destroyer* sounded much better on a pair of JBL L-100s than audiophile-approved Magnepans.

The new *Destroyer (Resurrected)* mix features producer Bob Ezrin back behind the console, adding here, embellishing there, with good results—until you read the phrase “digital copies of the original tapes” in the liner notes. Ugh. Word of the original tapes being remixed almost always spells disaster in the rock world, but here, Ezrin’s affection for the band is a work of art. This record might have even been bigger if these changes were employed the first time around. The effort is now certainly more epic. Isn’t that what Kiss is all about?

Forget the \$90 SACD released in 2010. It’s a marginal improvement over the original vinyl, still sounding flat and two-dimensional. And forget the new vinyl, mastered by Bob Ludwig for Universal. With barely more than half of each side of the LP devoted to musical information, you can guess what happened—compression. Epic fail. There’s no bass and it does not rock.

A quick comparison to the original pressing reveals that the new pressing has the same anemic dynamics and is slightly smoother on top. But zero dynamics means death to all that would otherwise rock. And that’s having played the vinyl through the Lyra Atlas cartridge and Qualia Indigo phonostage

via two massive Audio Research tube monoblocks. I guarantee it will suck on your system.

If you love Kiss, and you still don’t have the ability to listen to high-resolution digital, there’s no better reason than *Destroyer (Resurrected)* to invest in the technology. This is the way a rock record is supposed to sound: thundering bass, over-the-top dynamics, and a wall of guitars that sounds larger than life. And I’ve been there since the first tour.

Excitement builds on the HD Tracks version the second the car door slams in “Detroit Rock City.” The opening guitar riff sinks the hook into the listener, and is firmly set by the first chorus. Long-term members of the Kiss Army will either relish the *Resurrected* version or spurn it as blasphemous. However, if you’re in the former camp, the 24/96 rendition contains many surprises.

Guitar interplay between Paul Stanley and Ace Frehley is clearly delineated, as Stanley’s rhythm licks are no longer buried in the mix. The child in “King of the Night Time World” has its own space that stays separate from the rest of the band. Best of all, Gene Simmons’ bass playing not only has more pace, but the convincing weight it deserves. Also, the chorus on “Great Expectations” no longer sounds like it was recorded in a high-school bathroom. And that’s just side one. Another bonus? The alternate mix of “Sweet Pain.” Ezrin mentions “fixing something that has bothered him for decades.” I won’t spoil the surprise.



### Scorpions

*Love at First Sting*  
Audio Fidelity  
24kt. CD

**J**oe Harley, one of the two men behind the wildly successful Music Matters Blue Note reissue series, once told me that “sometimes a touch of compression can be your friend, especially on a rock record.” Wiser words were never spoken. I couldn’t get this disc out of the Music Direct box fast enough: I love the Scorpions. And I remember the day I bought my original copy of *Love at First Sting* on CD. I blew the tweeters out of both of my Magnepans that day, because I just couldn’t play this record loud enough, even with a pair of Krell monoblocks on hand.

Back then, it was a badge of honor to see the words “Full Digital Recording” on the cover of a CD, because we thought that meant you were getting all of the good stuff. In many ways,

my original Mercury CD pressing of this record stands the test of time because it fucking rocks. Especially now that I have a system that won’t crap out when twisting the volume control way beyond what’s reasonable and prudent.

But the current Audio Fidelity disc doesn’t make the grade. The minute Herman The German stomps the kick-drum pedal down at the beginning of “Rock You Like a Hurricane,” the party is over before it begins. Sure, the new version is cleaner and there’s a bit more inner detail, allowing you to hear slightly more interplay between the Scorps’ two lead guitarists, but it doesn’t rock anymore. One of the best heavy rock records of all time now sounds like Steely Dan’s *Aja*. And that’s wrong.

# Tears For Fears

## Tears For Fears

*The Seeds of Love*

*Songs From the Big Chair*

Mobile Fidelity Silver Series LP



## *The Seeds of Love*

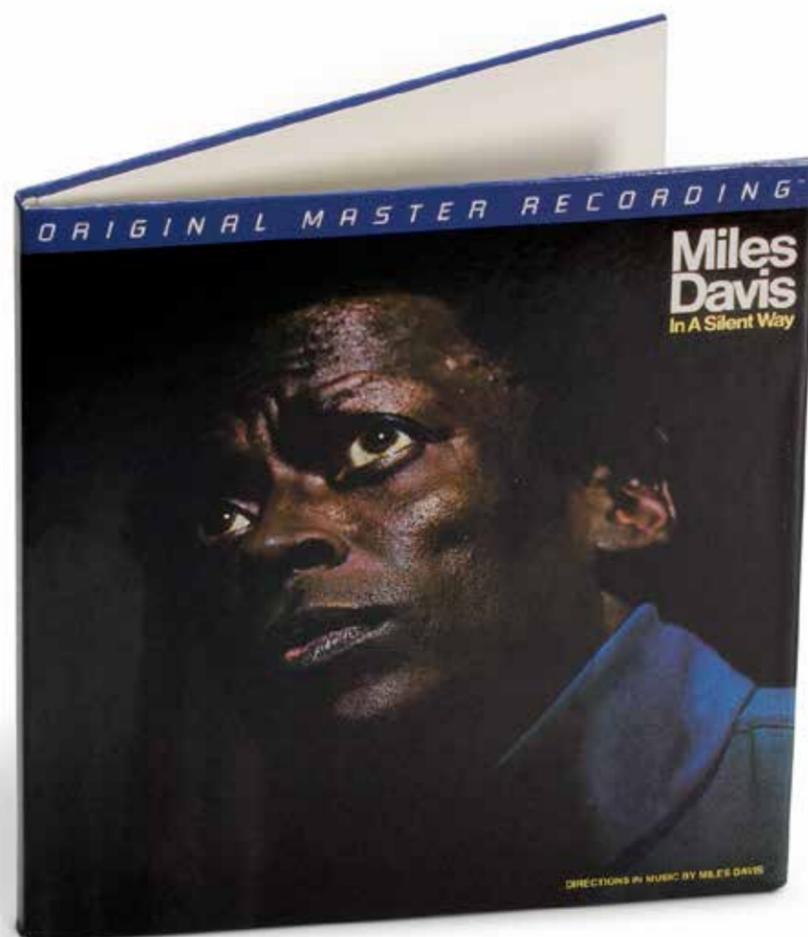
may not be Tears For Fears biggest commercial success, but it's the most meticulously crafted album produced by the duo comprised of Roland Orzabal and Curt Smith. As well as it should be, having been made on a budget of one million pounds. Combining a wide range of musical styles, *The Seeds of Love* has a slower, more deliberate pace than its predecessor, *Songs From The Big Chair*.

The gold standard is the UK Fontana pressing, but the US version is not far behind in terms of clarity and bass slam. The extra low-level information captured on the former version shows off the delicate layers of the compositional elements in a most exquisite fashion. Of course, this comes at a premium, with pristine UK copies fetching up to \$75, and good-condition copies selling for about half that. The elusive Japanese vinyl appears on eBay and the like occasionally, and demands \$100 and up. The US version is equally tough to find in record stores, but can usually be located on various auction sites for \$15-\$40. Caveat emptor.

Mobile Fidelity performed commendably on this new edition, bringing the classic to market in perfect shape for \$22.95. The bottom end is well sorted and the hallmark MoFi quality is here in spades. Our test sample is flat, quiet, and centered, and features excellent reproduction of the original artwork.

As this is a Silver Label title, the original master is not guaranteed (as it is in the Original Master series), and the records are pressed on 140g vinyl. Direct comparison to UK and US originals reveal more smoothness in the upper registers, suggesting it was cut either from a high-resolution digital copy or perhaps a safety master. This trait is most evident in the quietest passages, such as the beginning of "Swords and Knives" and "Famous Last Words." The original vinyl sounds bigger, with more sparkle and clarity. Tunes with less dynamic range make it tougher to distinguish between the original and the remaster. So, unless you can be assured a perfect original, the Silver Label LP is the way to go. Grading these on a numerical scale, with a mint UK original at 100 and an immaculate US original 95, the Silver Label ranks 91. Pretty damn good.

*Songs From the Big Chair* equates to more of a toss-up. Utilizing a low-numbered US pressing for comparison, the Silver Label easily comes out on top in terms of a smoother high end, but the original has more low-frequency energy with bigger, punchier dynamics. The former sounds smoother, yet it's a bit veiled. I still prefer the original. As it's Tears for Fears' biggest-selling record, you can get a clean one for about six bucks if you look hard.



**Miles Davis**  
*In a Silent Way*  
Mobile Fidelity, Hybrid SACD

## Miles Davis

### *In a Silent Way*

initiated Miles Davis' full-blown commitment to fusion, which continued with his next album, *Bitches Brew*. A cursory look at the record credits reveals major fusion powerhouses present and accounted for—Wayne Shorter, Herbie Hancock, Joe Zawinul, and Chick Corea.

Mint, early-stamper Columbia 360 pressings can fetch between \$50 and \$100. With only a late LP pressing and the Davis CD box set used for comparison, the MoFi disc is light years ahead. The highs are so smooth, and Davis' trumpet so fluid, it shows how good SACD can sound when handled with care.

A bit of tape hiss creeps into the quietest parts of the album, adding to the analog feel. MoFi's LP edition is coming soon. It will be interesting to see how, if any, it improves upon what's here.



**Crosby, Stills and Nash**  
*CSN*  
HD Tracks 24/96 download

It was tough to turn on MTV in the fall of 1982 for more than 20 minutes and not see the video for Yaz's "Don't Go." The shoulder pads were big, with big hair to match, and Brit synthpop ruled the airwaves. Yaz members Alison Moyet and Vince Clarke would go their separate ways a year later, but they were two of the major architects of a sound that would influence many others.

Guilty pleasures confessed, an original copy of this record still lurks in my record collection, and the Mobile Fidelity reissue is superior in every way. First released on Mute Records, the original is downright harsh and trebly. What would you expect from a bunch of keyboards and drum machines?

The MoFi crew does an excellent job at giving this dancefloor classic a bit of air and extension, as well as an actual soundstage, spread across the speakers with much more substantial bass energy that matches the dynamics of the group's 45RPM maxi-singles. (Yeah, guilty again). These characteristics are particularly evident on "I Before E, Except After C," on which Moyet's bubbly giggling fills the room with presence. It's anemic on the original pressing.

Most importantly, we tip our hats to Mobile Fidelity for continuing to release fun records. If this era was part of the soundtrack of your life, this one's a must.



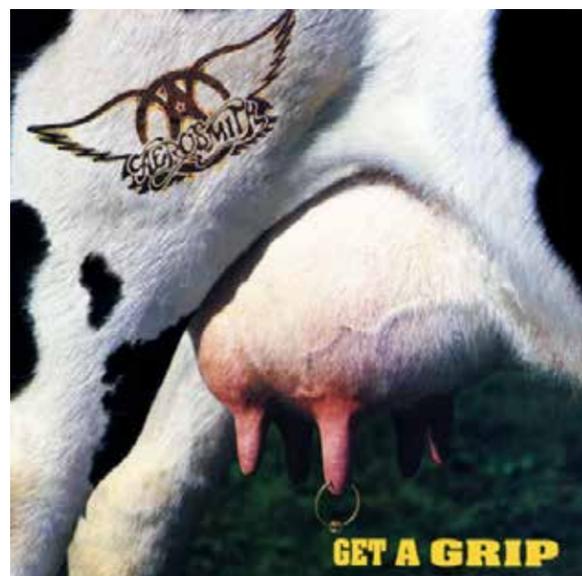
**Yaz**  
*Upstairs at Eric's*  
Mobile Fidelity Silver Series, LP

In 1977, CSN was ubiquitous, almost always accompanied by Fleetwood Mac's *Rumours* and *Hotel California* in everyone's record crate. Call it the Charles Barkley of AOR rock: If not for those other two records, CSN may just have been the monster album of the year, featuring a level of songwriting, focus, and attention to detail that would escape the group going forward.

Fans can rejoice anew. HD Tracks has thoroughly resurrected this classic. The company's version easily eclipses the original LP and dreadful 1995 CD remaster, both highly compressed. At higher volume levels, a little tape hiss comes through, but at a much lower level than the original; it's now anemic in comparison.

Of course, the congestion-free download means that Crosby, Stills and Nash's signature harmonies shine. The next biggest change for the better arrives via the massive bottom end; by comparison, the original seems rolled-off for AM airplay. Throughout, there is vast space, with a three-dimensional feel fully realized. You'll be looking for the surround-sound speakers. Vocal harmonies are distinct and feel considerably larger than life—a testament to the studio craftsmanship of the late 70s.

Lastly, every track is dynamic, with drums leaping from the speakers. Plus, the initial piano attacks explode. It only makes one wonder why HD Tracks didn't go all the way and release the album as a 24/192 download. It's obvious that the master is in excellent shape.



### Aerosmith

*Permanent Vacation* and *Get a Grip*  
24/96 HD Tracks Download

# Aerosmith

Aerosmith floated off almost everyone's radar during the end of Reagan's second term. The band's 1985 release, *Done With Mirrors*, went Apollo 13, leaving one of the world's hardest-rocking bands in the "Where are They Now" bin. Everything turned around by the end of the summer of '87. "Dude Looks Like a Lady" hit MTV like a bullet and got played almost nonstop; "Rag Doll" and "Angel" followed in early 1988. The Toxic Twins were back in full force, addictions at bay and squabbles behind them. Initiated by a collaboration with Run-D.M.C., the transformation marked one of the biggest comebacks in music history.

At the time, digital dominated, and LPs were basically pressed as an afterthought. Mastered by George Marino at Sterling, the original Geffen copy of *Permanent Vacation* is bright, much like the CD. If you can find one, the Japanese version qualifies as the best original; prepare to part with \$50, plus shipping.

The HD Tracks version restores much-needed dynamic range, allowing the record to rock harder than ever. While Aerosmith has enjoyed plenty of cheeky moments, many forget it was once a tightly knit unit. *Permanent Vacation* oozes texture, from Steven Tyler's harp playing to Joe Perry's guitar work. Now, with room to breath, it's easier to see the musical genius at hand.



### Aerosmith

*Pump*  
24/44.1 HD Tracks Download

Switching back to the original Geffen CD reveals a lack of vocal depth, echo, and decay—especially on "Dude Looks Like a Lady"—along with a tipped-up high end and compression on the drums. Granted, the latter still don't sound that much like drums on the HD version, but it's a step in the right direction. The HD edition also offers a much wider soundstage than the analog or digital originals. If this happens to be one of your choice classic-rock sets, you will marvel at the new details, with additional guitar fills, clearer overdubs, and more overall texture.

The next album in Aerosmith's catalog, *Pump*, is only rendered in the 44.1/24 format, and leaves this writer wondering: What's the point? Passing it off as a "high resolution" download is misleading, and while arguments abound regarding bit depth being just as important as sample rate, high-frequency crunchiness always seems to suffer. It's tough to believe a 24/96 file doesn't exist.

On 1993's *Get a Grip*, more compression works its way into the mix, and even though this is a 24/96 file, scant information is revealed when compared to the original CD. High frequencies are again accentuated on the original, still the HD version, admittedly more dynamic, comes across as flat. Unless you really need to hear "Cryin'" with another db or two of dynamic range, pass.

# The Beatles

The Web has been abuzz for more than a year about EMI's latest attempt to extract more oil from a well that we keep thinking will eventually run dry: the Beatles catalog. Yet the label manages to surprise us again, with a newly remastered set of vinyl.

Most retailers are discounting the new box to somewhere in the neighborhood of \$350-\$375, breaking the cost down to about \$27 per title; single albums are forthcoming. Not crazy money in audiophile terms. These records sound much better than anything you'll ever buy from Friday Music.

Unfortunately, Beatles lovers and audiophile collectors got thrown under the bus in one aspect, as the powers that be chose 24-bit/44.1kHz files for mastering instead of the high-resolution 24-bit/192kHz files used for editing. When the box sets reached the buying public last week, and seemingly everyone who was anyone--and a lot of those who aren't--promptly declared it rubbish.

Of course, once completist collectors are removed from the equation, as many of them won't take the damn things out of shrink wrap anyway, who is the real audience for these records? If you are lucky enough to have mint, low-stamper UK, German, or Japanese pressings of these classics, you already have the grail. Even if EMI had produced these new records from 24/192 masters, they would have still sucked in comparison.



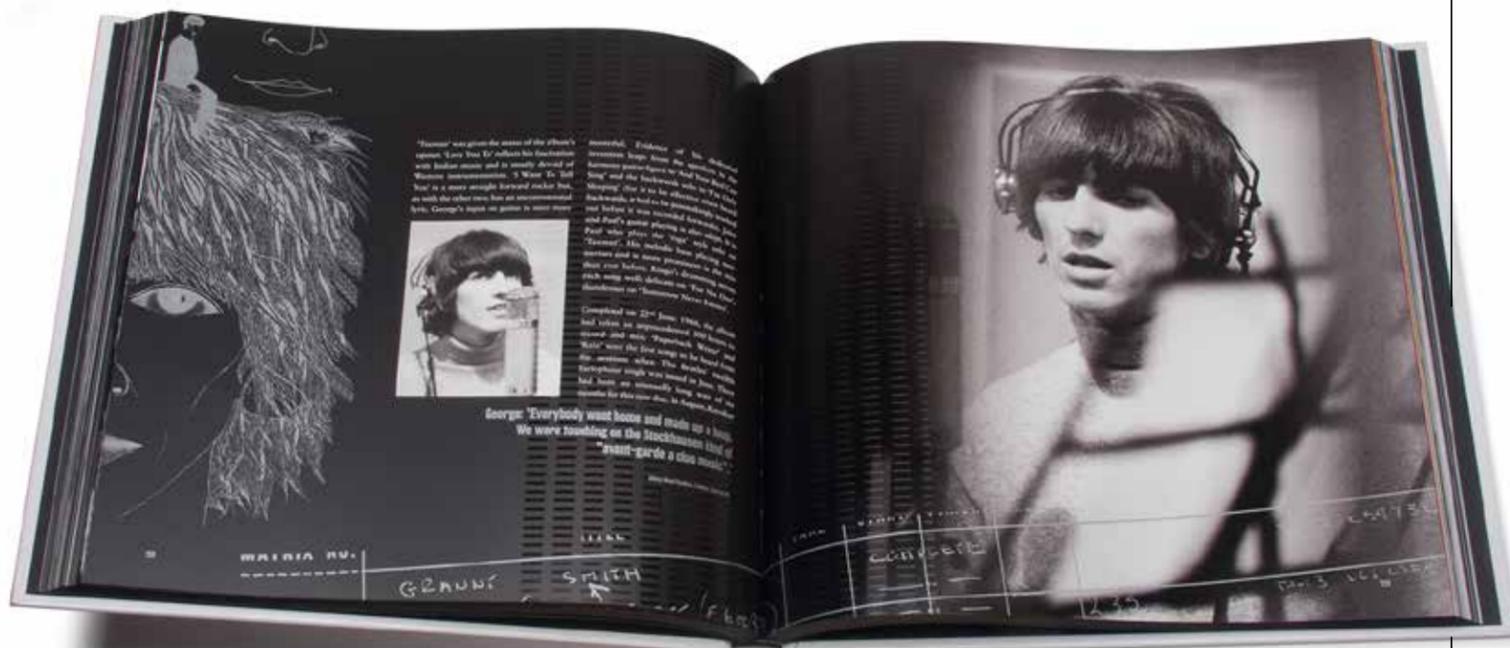
**The Beatles**  
*The Beatles Stereo Box Set*  
 EMI, 16LP Box Set

Sure enough, when evaluating a few tracks from *Sgt. Pepper* and *Magical Mystery Tour* on my \$100,000 analog front end, the new records fall short. This, however, is akin to comparing a New Beetle to a vintage '67 VW Bug with 1,500 miles that's either been lovingly restored to perfection or, better yet, is completely original and NOS. It's a pointless argument.

Even my favorite go-to set of Beatle albums, the blue BC-13 box, now fetches a thousand bucks in mint condition--if you can find one. When judged against these, the new records still lose a bit in top-end air and ultimate bass punch. Say what you will, but I like the stereo mixes.

Taking to the streets, I scoured a few of my local record stores (we've got quite a few here in Portland) and found used Beatles albums in horribly disfigured condition, with tattered covers and vinyl surfaces that I wouldn't play on a Close and Play. Average cost? About \$15, some as high as \$30. Most were American Capitol pressings. A rubbish situation, and you won't do much better on eBay.

Changing it up from my megabuck system to something more real world (a Rega RP6/Exact combination, playing through the vintage Nakamichi receiver and JBL speakers we used in our room at the Rocky Mountain Audio Fest), the new records sound pretty damn good.  
*(continued)*



The physical presentation of the box also qualifies as very good. Again, we are dealing with copies of copies, and the amount of money required to print these at a level commensurate with fine art is prohibitive. Contrast is picked up and some tonal scale lost, but again, when comparing to my mint BC-13 box or a scuffed American copy in the used bin, the new box comes out ahead. The jewel is the 252-page book, offering an engaging overview of the Beatles history. The records themselves sport a mixture of Parlophone label, Capitol label, and Apple label IDs--a fun touch for those new to Beatlemania. Not historically correct, but informative.

Early purchasers have mentioned sporadic pressing problems, but the set we received for review (purchased from SoundStageDirect.com) is free of defect. Hopefully, issues remain limited to the first out of the chute. A gentle hand is required to remove the tightly fit outer

slipcover, but I'm guessing that if you can't remove it without damage, you're not much of a hit with ladies, either.

Seasoned audiophiles, record collectors, and music lovers often forget that new people discover the Beatles and vinyl, every day. A majority of them could care less about first-stamper this or German pressing that. If you have rare, original pressings of these records, relish the fact that you own a precious part of music history. You will never be happy with these pressings.

Those of you beginning your vinyl journey, whether music lover, budding audiophile, or both, the current Beatles box will prove a great addition to your collection. Who knows, they may lead you to get caught up in all this madness to seek out a few mint originals for your collection someday. ●

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## 2012's Best Audiophile Pressings

By Jeff Dorgay

**2012** proved bountiful for remarkable audiophile-grade releases. SACDs, CDs, LPs, and high-resolution downloads were all represented by titles worthy of repeat listens on the best stereo systems money can buy.

In particular, Mobile Fidelity, Speakers Corner, and Analogue Productions stepped up their respective games in terms of quality and quantity. And while Music Matters halved its Blue Note series to two pressings per month (compared to the four titles its released over the past few years), the selections stayed strong. How much more gold is available to mine in the Blue Note catalog? Only Joe Harley and Ron Rambach know for sure.

And digital? While Neil Young's hints

at a new format via Pono, it remains in the distance, and a few boutique labels have started to release DSD downloads (which few listeners have the hardware to decode at this point), 24/96 and 24/192 files grew closer to the mainstream—at least to the audiophile crowd.

The best news of the year? HD Tracks and other high-res download services gained access to a broader spectrum of titles. Classic rock albums, ECM catalog fare, and even a few current releases are now pouring from the imprint's tap.

Below, you'll find my favorite audiophile pressings of 2012, in no particular order of significance other than alphabetical. With rare exception, all are chosen for their combination of fun and sound quality.

**Anne Bisson** *Blue Mind*, Fidelio, 180g LP

**Elvis Costello** *Imperial Bedroom*, Mobile Fidelity, 180g LP

**The Doors** *L.A. Woman*, Analogue Productions, 200g 45RPM 2LP

**Bob Dylan** *The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan*, Mobile Fidelity, 180g 45RPM 2LP

**Roberta Flack & Donny Hathaway**

*Roberta Flack & Donny Hathaway*, HD Tracks, 24/192 download

**Herbie Hancock** *Empyrean Isles*, Music Matters, 180g 45RPM 2LP

**Kiss** *Destroyer-Resurrected*, HD Tracks, 24/96 download (not the LP)

**Lynyrd Skynyrd** *Street Survivors*, Mobile Fidelity, LP

**Jaco Pastorius** *Jaco Pastorius*, ORG, 180g 45RPM 2LP

**The Rolling Stones** *12 x 5*, HD Tracks

**Horace Silver** *Finger Poppin' With the Horace Silver Quintet*, Music Matters, 180g 45RPM 2LP

**Weather Report** *Heavy Weather*, ORG, 180g 45RPM 2LP



Chan Marshall (Cat Power) captured in one of her final tour appearances, playing Vancouver's Vogue Theater on November 2, 2012.

*Photo by David Thai*

# Jazz & Blues

By Jim Macnie



**Esperanza Spalding**  
*Radio Music Society*  
Heads Up, LP or CD

A conundrum exists within the jazz-inflected R&B of Esperanza Spalding's fourth album, and it's based on identity. The acclaimed bassist, who famously won the Best New Artist Grammy last year, is a superb instrumentalist, gifted improviser, decent singer, and fledgling pop songwriter. Because she's got big ears and plenty of ambition, she positioned *Radio Music Society* to incorporate all these skills. It achieves its goal: You can dissect several of the tracks and come up with chunks of every one of the aforementioned elements. But, as they form a whole, they melt all over each other and get gooey. This 12-song program is a bit overwhelming, in the wearisome sense.

Like a mix of Minnie Ripperton and Meshell N'degeocello, Spalding flits through the music, negotiating funk beats, launching syncopation, and addressing rhythmic changeups like a bronco rider daring to be thrown. Her agility is impressive, but the kaleidoscopic nature of the passages finds one song bleeding into the next. Taken individually, the melodies are attractive; heard together, their jagged designs dare you to follow for three or four tracks in a row. This is one of the itchiest records I've ever heard.

Diamonds shine when cracked away from the whole. "City of Roses" supports its jumpy architecture. "Cinnamon Tree" offers breathing room. Stevie Wonder's "I Can't Help It" features a gorgeous swoop. The title cut is also strong, the tune about the magic that can emerge when spinning the dial during a car ride. Ultimately, it provides good advice for Spalding's disc: *Radio Music Society* sounds best while digesting each track on its own.

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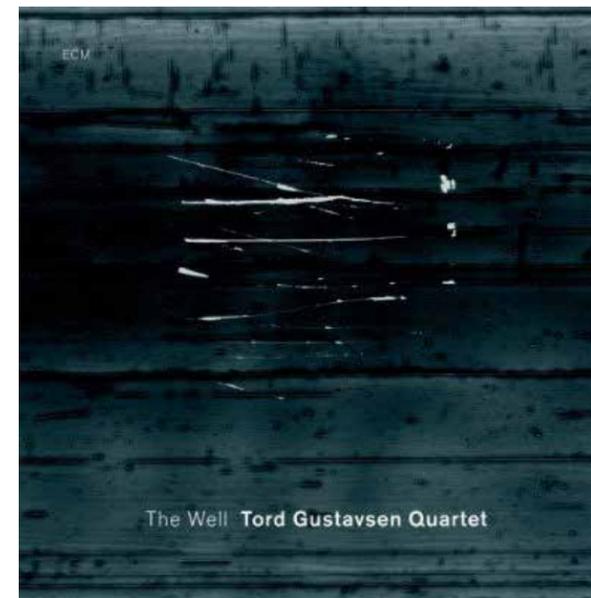
Over the years this has included tonearms, speakers (both active and passive), a record label producing and recording some of the world's finest musicians, cabling and interconnects, phono stages, tuners, amplifiers, DACs, preamps, CD players, crossovers, power supplies, whole house distributed audio systems, and networked audio components such as audiophile-grade servers and streamers.

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### Tord Gustavsen Quartet

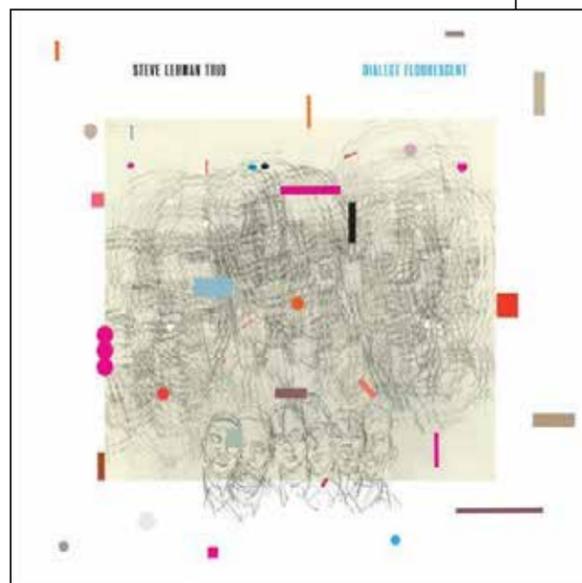
*The Well*  
ECM, CD

Some bandleaders are so tied to a particular sound that, during the arc of their career, it seems formula is installed. Norwegian pianist Tord Gustavsen fashioned a seductive style of balladry when his 2003 ECM debut *Changing Places* introduced us to an instrumentalist who made silence a constant companion, and who appeared as smitten with the establishment of mood as he was with the generation of interplay. Most of the records that arrived in its wake forward a similar message.

*The Well* brings more of the same to the table. But rather than chide the artist for a monolithic view, applaud his focus and dedication to poised reflection. The more I spin this album, the more I fall for its through-composed persona. And such a musical description isn't literally true. Gustavsen's team of tenor saxophonist Tore Brunborg, bassist Mats Eilertsen, and drummer Jarle Vespestad invents personalized lines on every track. But the ensemble's demeanor is so tight, and so infatuated with the pianist's melodies, little "soloing" takes place—at least in the old-fashioned sense.

Occasionally, the group has a problem with originality. Gustavsen operates in the wake of Keith Jarrett. The touch, the tunes, the gentle sweep of the reflective aura giving the music its main personality—they're all beholden to the iconic pianist. While sounding tender and alluring, Brunborg, too, seems a composite of Jan Garbarek and Charles Lloyd. To say the least, it's a sweet combo of influences, yet it makes the collective hard to pick out in a crowd.

Nevertheless, *The Well* possesses enough eloquence to control its emotional environment in a deeply authoritative way, an achievement in any music. If you're into glistening melancholy, this one has a poetic side.



**Steve Lehman**  
*Dialect Fluorescent*  
Pi, CD

**Y**ou can barely get through a review of Steve Lehman's work without bumping up against the word "angular." Hairpin turns made by the saxophonist's horn, along with the pressurized kinetics of his mainstay trio Fieldwork (Lehman, drummer Tyshawn Sorey, pianist Vijay Iyer), have created an artistic persona that's a smidge foreboding.

But lyricism is often audible through his rattling alto lines. And on this new, hard-driving trio disc, contours are more pronounced and several of the hallmark angles beveled. At the start of the program, on the feisty "Allo-centric," one fleet barrage of notes seemingly conjures the famed "Figaro, Figaro" exclamation from *The Barber of Seville*. It brings to Lehman's occasionally steely sound the human cry that Ornette Coleman brokered.

*Dialect Fluorescent* could well be Lehman's most approachable album. Between original pieces, it features romps through gems by Duke Pearson, Jackie McLean, and John Coltrane—as well as an update of "Pure Imagination" from *Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory*. As the improv bustles along, a sense of traditional song bubbles up. Lehman and his colleagues—bassist Matt Brewer and drummer Damion Reid—attack the standard tunes with the same ardor they bring to the leader's songs. I use the term "bustle" because *Dialect Fluorescent* is a punchy affair, teeming with three-way interaction that barely takes a breath. Reid and Brewer have absorbed the sideways funk lingo established by Steve Coleman's M-BASE strategies, and their coordination on unpredictable rhythms is expert. They bring a deep swing to Pearson's "Jeannine."

Lehman studied with McLean and Anthony Braxton, among others, and his piercing tone is a fetching blend of both these masters. In cahoots with a profound support team, Lehman's sound is as eloquent as it is formidable. Here's a date that just might become one of jazz's classic sax trio discs.

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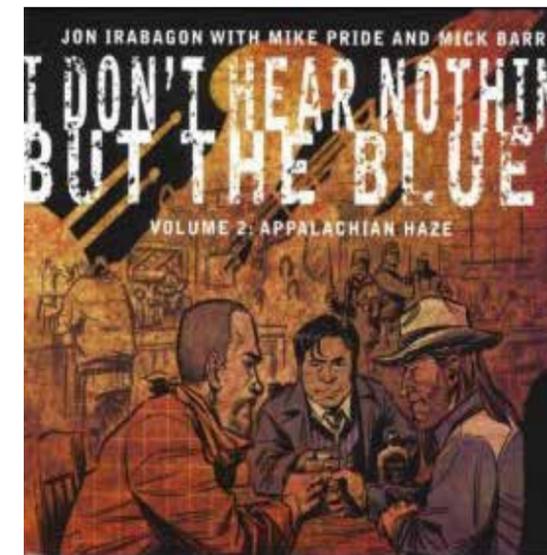


**FOCAL**  
THE SPIRIT OF SOUND

Versatility is a plus in any profession, and Jon Irabagon's improvising skills have powered a handful of approaches during the last few years. In 2008, the saxophonist walked away with the top prize from the prestigious Thelonious Monk Competition, an annual event spotlighting young talent working in a mainstream jazz vernacular.

But Irabagon is anything but a Johnny One Note. The sundry lingos in which he's shown an interest are many, and he's especially eloquent when it comes to skronk. Of late, from his fractious bass-and-drums trio Foxy, to his freewheeling *I Don't Hear Nothin' But The Blues* collabo with percussionist Mike Pride, he's investigating the impact of extended blowing. This second album by IDHNBTB adds string player Mick Barr from radical guitar/drums duo Orthreim. The result boosts the fierceness level a couple notches, and gives us one of the orneriest ragas ever.

©Photo by Bryan Murray



**Jon Irabagon, Mike Pride, and Mick Barr**  
*I Don't Hear Nothin' But The Blues Volume 2: Appalachian Haze*  
Irabagast, CD

The title piece is a thorny squall that engages without melody and bets the farm on the glories of friction. It is euphonious only if you've grown up absorbing precedents such as Coltrane's *Ascension* and Lightning Bolt's "World Wobbly Wide." But its expressionistic alarm engages in all sorts of ways.

The furor comes from a palpable sense of collaboration, and its emotional power reignites every 10 minutes or so. It's not a suite. This mighty wind starts blowing from the get-go and doesn't stop, or even downshift, until it concludes four minutes later. But its beehive swirl does have nuanced sections. Somewhere around half-way, Barr rocks a circular phrase that underscores the hints of minimalism that dart throughout the piece. It's Pride that seems to control the amendments. There's a spot during which he brings the storm inside a strip club with a saucy tom-tom maneuver. Irabagon answers by further exploding his lusty *cris de cour*.

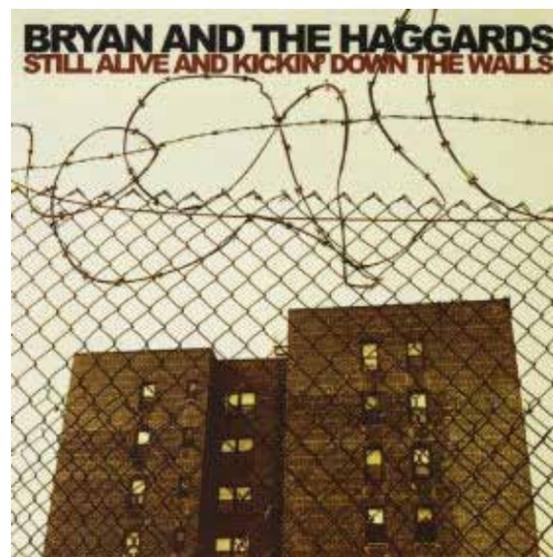
What these guys find in "Appalachian Haze" is a way to lock in together and rattle towards a place where exclamation and tumult takes on its own definition of grace. Looking over their shoulders at Ornette Coleman's "Free Jazz" and "Song X," they know damn well it's out there, and don't stop till the plant their own flag.

**D**rawing a line between country music and jazz takes some doing. There's the high-spirited charm of Bob Wills' western swing, and the fluid improvisational ideas of killer soloists like Speedy West and Jimmy Bryant. There's also the daffy romp Eugene Chadbourne took through the music on the endlessly entertaining freeprov & western *There'll Be No Tears Tonight*. But there's not much else, especially in the modern realm. That's why the barroom bounce of Bryan and the Haggards feels good to open-minded fans that dig both styles. With two gallivanting saxophones upfront and a songbook that milks the cream of Merle Haggard's superb canon, the puckish Brooklyn outfit brings some skronk to the honky-tonk.

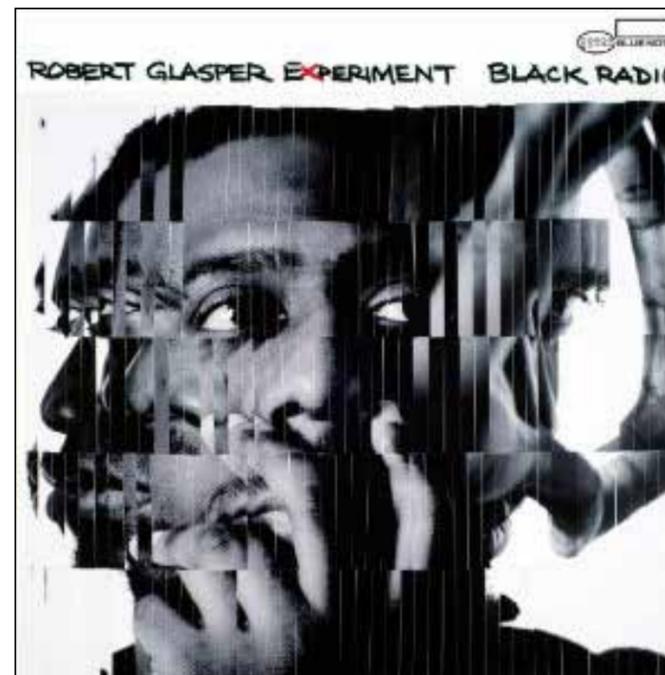
*Still Alive And Kickin' Down The Walls* stands the quintet's second disc, and like its predecessor, it's a hoot. The band—saxophonists Bryan Murray and Jon Irabagon, guitarist Jon Lundbom, bassist Moppa Elliot, and drummer Danny Fischer—may genuflect to timeless Hag tunes such as “Turning Off A Memory” and “Ramblin' Fever,” but it peppers 'em with ideas that come from Sonny Rollins and the Art Ensemble of Chicago. Because the melodies get as much dap as the mayhem, most of the action stays on the twang side. Yep, dissonant moments and solos veer into the stratosphere, but the rhythm section keeps chugging along, adhering to the tune at hand.

I like it when it gets giddy. “Seeing Eye Dog” isn't Haggard's best-known tune, but

it's one of his most fun. These guys hear the essential humor and provide plenty of “Yackety Sax” allusions during the update. Indeed, *Still Alive And Kickin' Down The Walls* occasionally seems to be as much a nod to Boots Randolph as it is to Haggard. But the ensemble also has a serious side. One of the most gorgeous moments comes during “Turnin' Off a Memory,” a barroom ballad that finds Murray and Irabagon blending their lines in a swirl of sadness, making room for all sorts of idiosyncratic phrasing. Listen closely and you can almost hear a tear dropping into the beer.



**Bryan and the Haggards**  
*Still Alive And Kickin' Down The Walls*  
Hot Cup, CD



### Robert Glasper Experiment

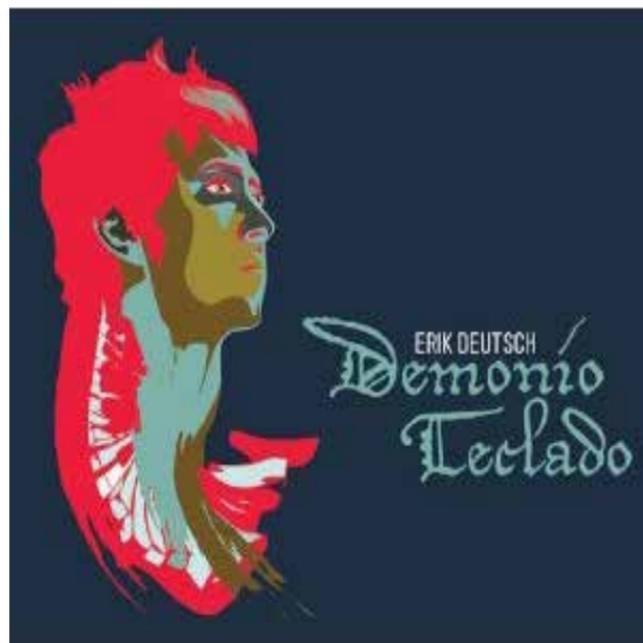
*Black Radio*  
Blue Note, CD or 180g 2LP

In a recent *DownBeat* cover story, pianist Robert Glasper says he's basically looking for trouble by blending hip-hop, improv, and swing, and that he's got no problem with what people think of the resultant chemistry on his new album because jazz needs “a big-ass slap.” *Black Radio* indeed entwines the three aforementioned elements, but it would be hard to deem its music as a radical shift or a defiant statement that rebuffs decades of orthodoxy.

Grooves abound, echoes of 70s R&B bubble up, rhymes get dropped by notable MCs, and soulful vocal tracks are nudged to the forefront. As a collage of modern urban moves, it really works. There's an enticing flow that starts at Erykah Badu's glide through John Coltrane's “Afro Blue,” curves through Lupe Fiasco's thoughts about “the transformation of niggas,” veers towards philosophical pillow talk from Meshell Ndegeocello, and winds up with a kaleidoscopic refraction of Nirvana's “Smells Like Teen Spirit.” It's all plush, pretty, and mildly engaging, but as everything plays out, you never feel the sting of the slap Glasper referenced.

Maybe it's for the best. Jazz is a music of nuance just as much as it is a music of exclamation. And with the declamation of MCs getting most of the attention, hip-hop's subtleties are often under-appreciated, as well. The canny architectural design that gives *Black Radio* its shape employs plenty of dreamy funk that drifts from place to place and offers a sizable scope. At separate junctures, it allows Lalah Hathaway and Ledisi a chance to bring their own blend of church and boudoir into a romantic realm that conjures Massive Attack's shimmering ballads.

Ultimately, flash is missing from the formula. Hip-hop's most kinetic rhymes are energizers, and actual parts of the rhythm section. Between all the vocal cooing and rounded tones of the Fender Rhodes, there's something a tad too mellow about the program; it's a bit too smitten with the quiet-storm vibe. That said, it is the most natural stylistic confluence the leader has created thus far, and its pleasures are many. I'd just like to hear a bit more animation. I bet Glasper's got a hell of a party record in him yet.



**Erik Deutsch**  
*Demonio Teclado*  
 Hammer & String, CD

**G**arish flash is one reason fusion got a bad rap. Yes, rock rhythm can assist jazz improv, bringing in a more mainstream audience. But too many fireworks from a keyboardist or guitarist (hello, Return To Forever) beget a cheese factor, especially if melody gets left in the dust.

Keyboardist Erik Deutsch's instrumentals might be deemed some kind of fusion progeny. Basically, they're wordless pieces used as soloing vehicles. Yet instead of radical time signatures and hammer-on extrapolation, they feature catchy melodies and subtle dynamics.

Deutsch worked with Charlie Hunter for a few years. He knows the advantages of a chops display now and then. But on *Demonio Teclado*, he heads in the opposite direction, making compact statements that establish little worlds of sound.

Baby Boomers might recognize this approach as that taken by the Section, the 70s foursome of session dudes that backed Jackson Browne and others. Artsy twenty-somethings know the tact via its recent revival by Marco Benevento and likeminded associates. Deutsch is a clever synthesist; some pieces here sound like Booker T & the MGs working the CTI songbook. Others feel like Steely Dan throwing punches at Black Sabbath.

The music lives and dies on its ability to make an engaging arc in just a few minutes, and to a one, the tracks on Deutsch's third disc rise and fall with a natural grace. A trumpet blasts over a backbeat, a steel guitar gets fuzzy while floating in the ether—there's no lack of hues swirling around Deutsch's palette. By the time Neil Young's "Don't Let It Bring You Down" saunters by, you definitely understand what Hunter means when he talks about his pal's "soundscapy stuff." Deutsch has more than a little cinema in him.

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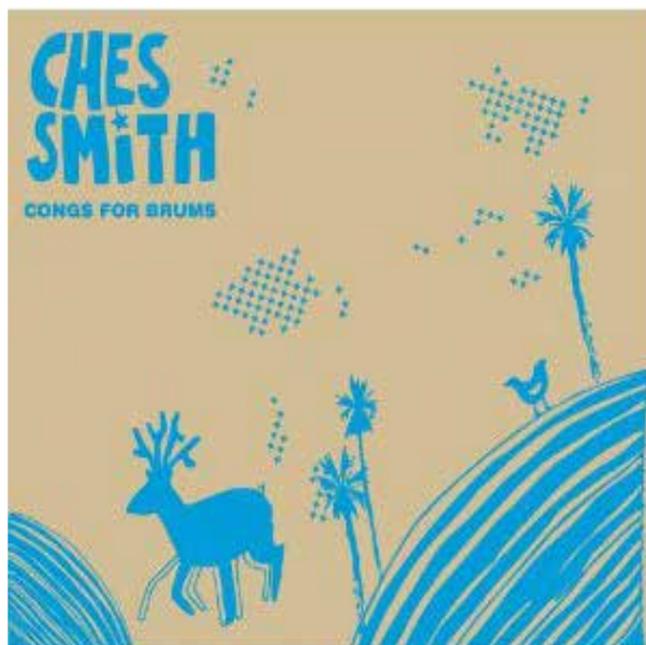
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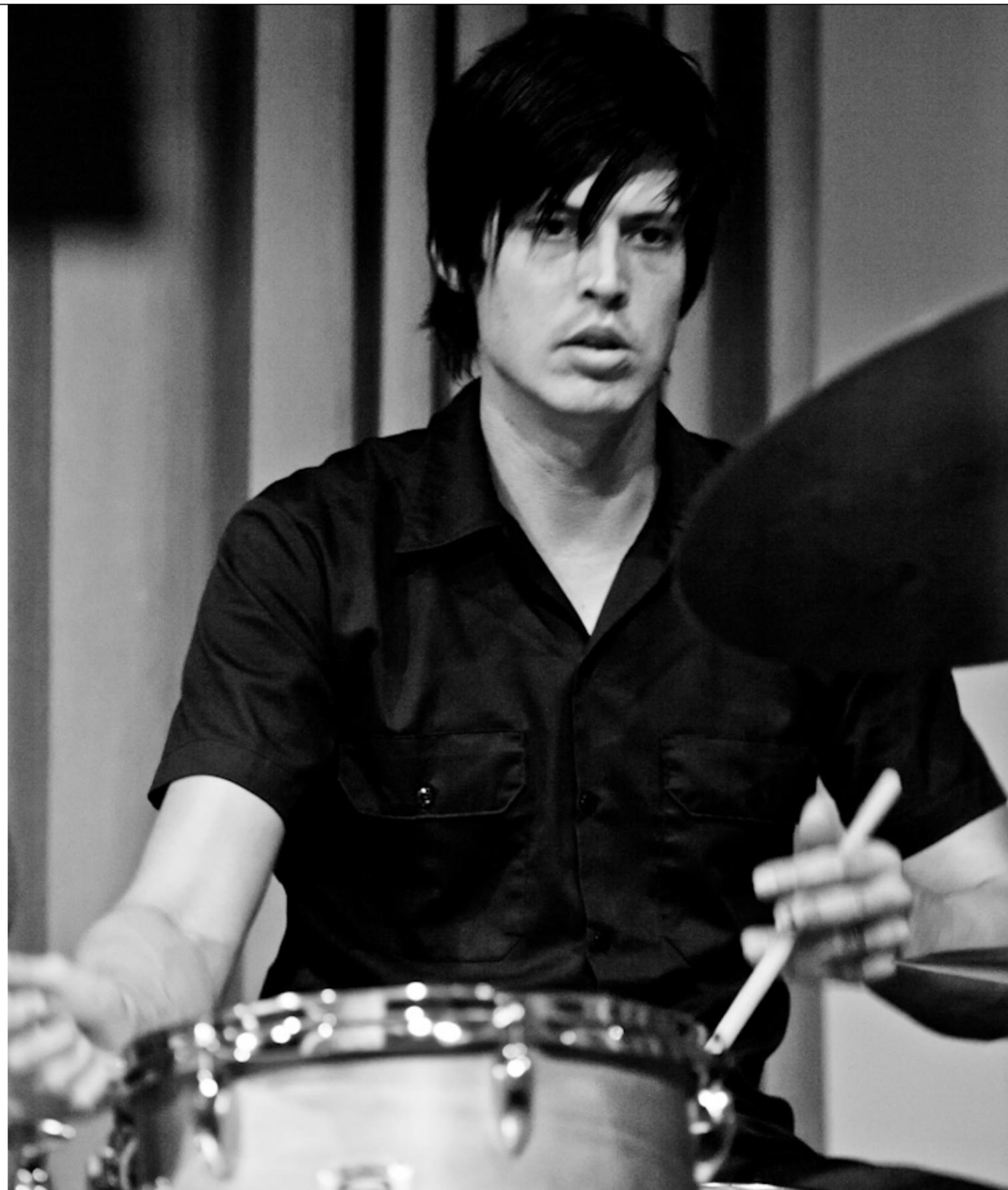
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### Ches Smith's Cong For Brums

*Psycho Predictions*  
88 Records, CD

**F**rom Baby Dodds tumbling his way through “Spooky Drums” to Han Bennink getting giddy on *Tempo Comodo*, I’ve long been intrigued by the choices a percussionist makes when he or she sets up shop alone. Over the course of three discs, Ches Smith has come up with some intriguing turns. Away from noted collaborators such as Marc Ribot and Tim Berne, and under the moniker Cong For Brums, he’s melded his skills at the trap set with a yen for electronics and assorted percussive instruments. The resultant array of soundscapes is as logical and gorgeous as it is abstract and hermetic.



The three compositions on Smith’s latest outing are titled “Death Chart,” “Birth Chart,” and “Conclusion: That’s Life.” Drawing from mentors such as Pauline Oliveros and Alvin Currin, using lessons picked up during his studies at Mills College, the NYC drummer builds a narrative arc that includes moments of Morse Code mixed with doom-metal flourishes. He calls ‘em etudes, but you can call ‘em the most well-plotted *cris de coeur* ever—even the bleeps are nicked from Pac Man.

Smith, a lanky dude who plays a somewhat tiny drum set featuring a mile-high crash cymbal, recorded *Psycho Predictions* live, and its improvised design claims a deliberate feel. That’s a plus. It may seem like a parade of textured thwacks and buzzes, but each segue does a good job of leading the music away from randomness. “I’m trying to find a way to connect the three instruments compositionally,” he says when speaking about the drums, vibes, and electronics. “I had this whole thing mapped out harmonically, but it came together differently than what I had imagined when I set out.”

There are giddy passages with a Raymond Scott feel, luminous passages with a Cluster vibe, and a moment or two of good old Baby Dodds as well. Smith may do strong work with such associates as Mary Halvorson and Xiu Xiu, but he has no problem creating a load of eloquence on his own.

© Photo by Peter Gannushkin

During the last several years, Brooklyn has been a hotbed for creative jazz, and it shows no sign of abating. To wit: The raucous yet architectural music of drummer Tomas Fujiwara & the Hook Up. On *The Air is Different*, the quintet demonstrates its scope with a program that allows a swirl of singular motifs to have their say while still presenting a unified statement.

At various points, saxophonist Brian Settles growls, trumpeter Jonathan Findlayson coos, and guitarist Mary Halvorson screeches; the cagey rhythm section of bassist Trevor Dunn and the bandleader gives such disparate textures a solidifying glide. Elements of swing have as much say as elements of rock, and Fujiwara's compositions remain eloquent, whether they're musing poignantly, as they do on "For Ours," or celebrating agitation, as on "Double Lake, Defined."

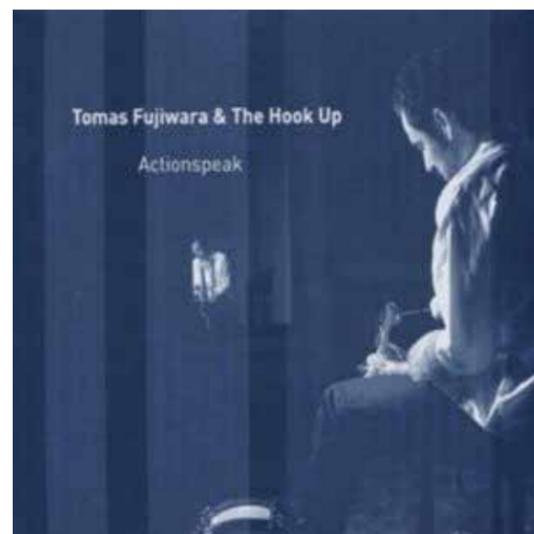
Breadth is something in which Fujiwara is truly invested. In the liner notes, he quotes Fela Kuti regarding the topic of rhythm's responsibilities, and reveals inspirational sources that include Bjork, a Buddhist bell-bowl, and the first 16 bars of Talib Kweli's rhyme on Black Star's "Definition." The curves that mark "Smoke-Breathing Lights"—a piece about the way different people



© Photo by Peter Gannushkin

walk—represent a microcosm of the program. In the middle of a 10-minute suite (of sorts), an exchange between Halvorson and Settles gives each a chance to move from stormy to sublime.

Something similar happens on the title track, dedicated to Fujiwara's grandfather, a Buddhist priest. It begins with a march vibe, makes room for a knotty passage, and harks to Coltrane's *Interstellar Space* with a romp between Settles and the drummer. Agility is a prerequisite for this outfit, and as the music morphs, a thesis starts to float between the passages: Life's contours are many, and you'd best be prepared for what's around the corner.



**Tomas Fujiwara & The Hook Up**  
*The Air Is Different*  
482 Music, CD

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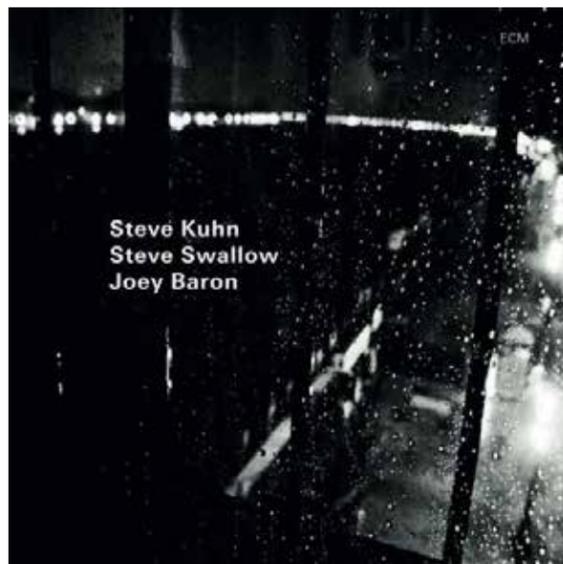
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**Steve Kuhn**  
*Wisteria*  
 ECM, CD



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**M**easured moments dominate Steve Kuhn's new trio disc. The 74-year-old pianist isn't known for flaunting expressionism or dedicating himself to experimentation—unless expressionistic moves are deeply lyrical and inventing phrase after phrase qualifies as an experimental tack.

I'll stop the facetiousness: We know both notions to be true, and Kuhn, who brings a modern bop lingo with him everywhere he goes, is skilled in both approaches. This date with electric bassist Steve Swallow and drummer Joey Baron resonates because each musician claims a singular sound, so the group's collective demeanor is singular as well.

While the musicians don't always mesh, they don't always mesh in truly fascinating ways—ways draw you into the music. How cool is that?

When they do fully connect, which is often, it's in a variety of dynamics. "A Likely Story"—the track that would kick off side two if *Wisteria* were a vinyl LP—is a smoker, a piece that refutes the aforementioned "measured" comment. The crackling hard bop that Kuhn brought to Coltrane's post-*Giant Steps* working band becomes front and center here. With Baron conjuring Tony Williams and Swallow proving how waxing nimble can mean waxing provocative, the ensemble invests in exclamation.

Yet *Wisteria* is ultimately about variety, and the glide that arrives on "Pastorale," as well as the reflection that defines the title cut (a gorgeous tune written by another of the pianist's employers from more than a half century ago, Art Farmer), remind listeners that Kuhn is an expert at scripting a program. Sometimes plush, sometimes spartan, this is an album that shifts just often enough to keep you turning your head. ●

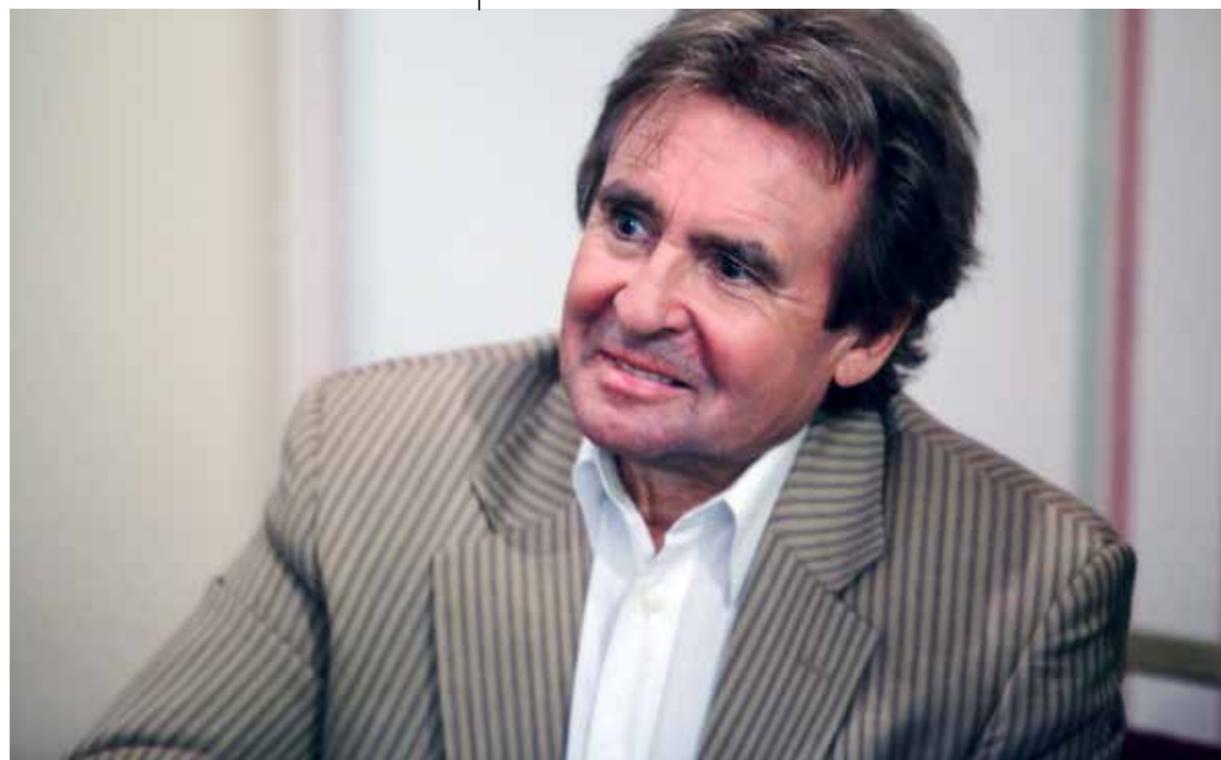


Photo by Getty Images

# Davy Jones

## He was a Monkee's Monkee

By Ben Fong-Torres

**D**o celebrity deaths really happen in threes? I think not. But, then, there was Whitney Houston. Then Davy Jones. Then Ronnie Montrose.

Talk about three different musicians. Soul, pop, rock.

I got calls about all three, but it was the San Francisco Chronicle that asked me for more than a sound bite. The paper wanted an appreciation of Davy Jones, the former Monkee.

"Appreciation"? I wasn't sure, at first. But then, as I thought about that group, and the TV shows and music they left behind, I became more agreeable to dashing off a quick piece. Here's part of it:

Of the four (Monkees), Davy Jones was perhaps the most accepting of his lot in life, as part of the group that was derided as a sitcom copy of the Beatles; put together by producers who auditioned some 400 would-be Monkees; forever known as the "Pre-Fab Four."

After the Monkees' show went off ABC-TV and after the band disbanded in 1969, Jones and Dolenz attempted reunions, despite the fact that Tork had split in '68, and Nesmith, an accomplished singer and songwriter ("Different Drum"), had gone solo.

Jones soldiered on, and, in 1987, was working on an autobiography, "They Made a Monkee Out of Me." "It won't be bitter," he said about the book. "When little kids ask me, 'You weren't in the Monkees, were you?' you can't say, 'Piss off, I don't want to talk about the Monkees.'"

The group had nothing to be ashamed of. After all, it wasn't as if they were a garage band that decided to copy the Beatles and attained a similar level of fandemonium. As Nesmith told me, when I spoke with him for a magazine profile in 1984: "The Monkees' was a TV series that was hoped would mirror the times. The four of us were hired as actors. And the show fell right onto the horns of a dilemma. It was perceived not as a TV show but as a rock and roll group that had landed a series. We weren't a rock and roll band, but as the thing began to twist around it became, 'Here are

these guys who're nothing but a TV show coming on like they're a group. The fact that the press expected us to make serious music was strange. It was like condemning a Chevrolet station wagon for not performing well at the Indy 500."

**"I watched from the side of the stage," he said. "I saw the girls going crazy, and I said to myself, 'This is it. I want a piece of that.'"**

For a manufactured group, they performed well enough; Nesmith and Tork were folk musicians; Dolenz and Jones, stage actors. But the latter two could also sing, and handled lead vocals on most of the Monkees' hits. Jones sang lead on one of the group's more enduring recordings, "Daydream Believer," as well as "A Little Bit Me, A Little Bit You" (written by Neil Diamond).

The Monkees, with reunions engineered by Jones and Dolenz, kept coming full circle. So did Jones himself, whether as a solo act or as an actor.

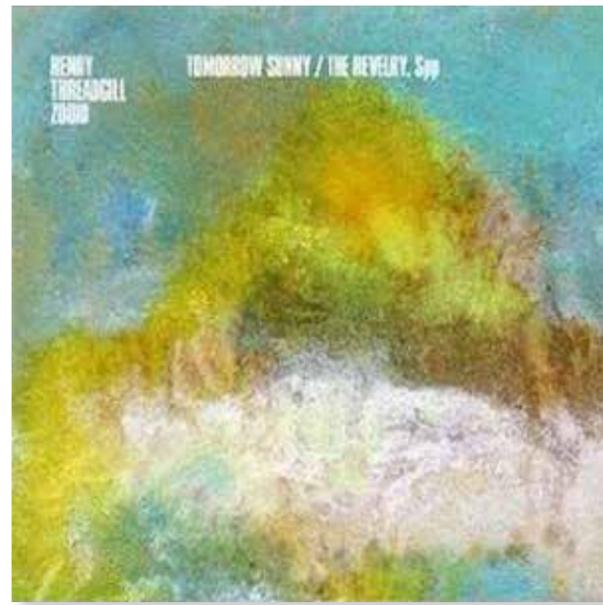
Just before becoming a Monkee, he'd played the Artful Dodger in "Oliver!" in London and on Broadway. In February, 1964, he was part of the cast of "Oliver!" on the Ed Sullivan Show, which featured the American debut of the Beatles. "I watched from the side of the stage," he said. "I saw the girls going crazy, and I said to myself, 'This is it. I want a piece of that.'"

He got it, and he never let go. Talking with a TV reporter, I called Jones "a Monkee's Monkee," and she burst into laughter. But I meant it as a compliment. Jones had pride in his work. As his friend, Rich Enea, noted, "He always said that being a Monkee ruined his acting career – and then he'd laugh." On the road, he was indefatigable, rising early to do TV interviews, then staying after concerts to sign autographs and pose for photos. Last summer, Enea said, a reunion tour was cut short when Tork and Dolenz dropped out. "Davy wanted to keep going. He was born for the stage." ●

Henry Threadgill has never had a problem with making a stark canvass project a wealth of tension. His writing for Air's 1976 "Through a Keyhole, Darkly" uses nothing but flute, bass, and drums to mount a dramatic assault with a deeply poetic demeanor. So it's little wonder that the 68-year-old composer has found ways to refine such maneuvers with his larger ensembles. He's been writing for his Zooid sextet for well over a decade, and on *Tomorrow Sunny/The Revelry, Spp*, he waxes minimal. Time and again, this group invites silence to be its seventh member.

The strings are in ascendance here, and their pithy interactions can be arresting. "See The Blackbird Now" is a virtual chamber piece that operates in a hush. Christopher Hoffman's cello, Liberty Ellman's guitar, and Stomu Takeishi's bass guitar crabwalk around each other, blending shards of sound as they inch along. The risky tack underscores Threadgill's thorny eloquence and, as eruptions of dissonance arise, his eerie bass flute connects all the dots. Something similar happens on "Put On Keep/Frontispiece, Spp." Elliot Humberto Kavee provides a cymbal wash, Jose Davilla donates a few trombone urps, and the strings bond for provocative stealth.

Zooid takes its name from biology, and references a cell that busts spontaneous moves "independent of its parent organism." Threadgill's wily arrangements guide most of the action on this album, but even during the inverted syncopations of the more animated pieces ("Ambient Pressure Thereby" builds to an explosive lift-off), each member gets to have an equal say in sculpting the final product. Democracy through a keyhole, sparsely.



**Henry Threadgill Zooid**  
*Tomorrow Sunny/The Revelry, Spp*  
Pi, CD



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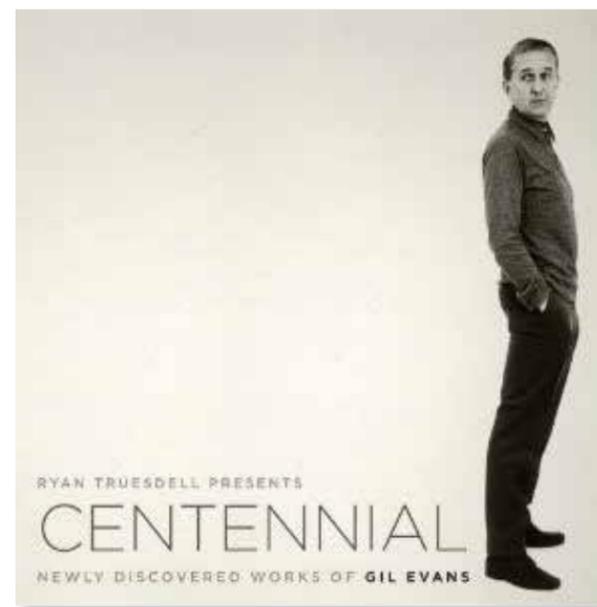
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**Ryan Truesdell Presents Centennial**

*Newly Discovered Works of Gil Evans*  
Artist Share, CD

Jazz repertory is full of options. Some interpreters take a classic piece and bend it, personalizing the texts with new designs. Others make a point of reveling in the original luster, marveling at the architectural essence.

Ryan Truesdell is in the latter camp with his elaborate nod to Gil Evans. Working as copyist for bandleader Maria Schneider, a devout Evans acolyte, Truesdell caught Evans fever and delved deeper into the revered composer/arranger's work, ultimately unearthing a handful of unrecorded scores. That's strong scholarship, but the joy the resultant music brings is even more important.

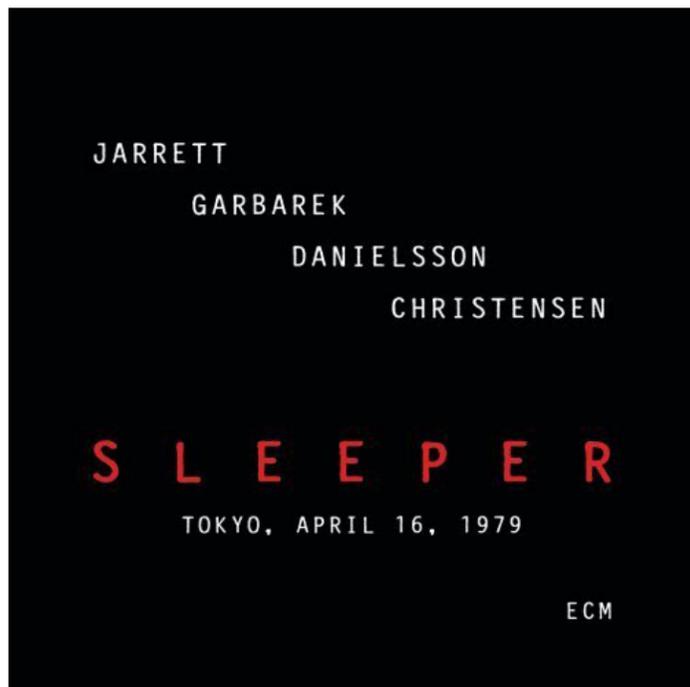
Evans, of course, is known for the poetry he brought to the fore on a flurry of Miles Davis collaborations, including 1960's *Sketches of Spain* (the pair's association began with the landmark *Birth of the Cool* sessions). His fare is marked by a lightness of timbre that somehow leaves room for a wealth of gravitas. The 10 tracks Truesdell displays have enough of an emotional arc to account for Evans' myriad approaches. The opening "Punjab" boasts a tabla, an air of mystery, and an open-ended feel. "How About You," a chart Evans used during his stint with Claude Thornhill's Orchestra in the 40s, is springy and grooving. The spin on Kurt Weill's "Barbara Song" is as seductive as music gets, with Joe Locke's vibraphone adding to the material's nuanced majesty. "Beg Your Pardon," one of three vocal tracks that nicely divide this lengthy program, is the oldest piece on the disc. It's a romantic ditty dressed in gorgeous swirls of brass and strings.

Truesdell's adherence to Evans' pen is nothing less than resolute. There are improvised moments, but the script is king. Zeal wafts through the music, behaving as if everyone's committed to nailing the innumerable subtleties. That's a winning tack, because unity is key to a big band's success.

As such buoyancy spins this 32-member ensemble towards eloquent heights, the collective's bonding becomes the music's background virtue. Gil would have respected that.



©Photo by Terje Mosnes



**Keith Jarrett**  
*Sleeper*  
 ECM, 2CD

## Keith Jarrett

**K**eith Jarrett's so-called American quartet—meaning the ensemble of bassist Charlie Haden, drummer Paul Motian, and saxophonist Dewey Redman led by the esteemed pianist during the early-mid 70s—has never lacked for accolades. But of late, musicians and critics alike have intently heralded its work. Rightfully so: The foursome's vitality is unique, boasting lyricism, agility, and a particularly earthy quality marked by Redman's natural gruffness.

In comparison, the pianist's European quartet of saxophonist Jan Garbarek, bassist Palle Danielsson, and drummer Jon Christensen feels a bit more prim. Overlapping in activity by several years, the bands have similar designs but different approaches. Everything seems comparatively reserved on luminous titles such as Euro 4's *Belonging* and *My Song*. *Sleeper*, a double-disc live affair fresh from the ECM vaults, eradicates that "prim" designation, and proves the band is closer to its rambunctious American cousins than conventional wisdom has had us believe.

Recorded during the same live 1979 date as the previously issued *Personal Mountains*, this new album is a cleverly contoured ride that suggests the rhythm sections of both outfits are of equal clout, supplying their colleagues with non-stop ardor that nudges Jarrett and Garbarek to unexpected levels of frenzy.

Maybe "frenzy" is too strong a term, but even in its quiet moments, *Sleeper* is rife with exuberance. Christensen's kinetic pummel, the leader's percussive trills, Garbarek's fierce attack—the album's signature trait is momentum,

and the vivid audio mix makes the action that much more animated. It's one of those dates where you agree with Jarrett's occasional "ohhhhhhh" interjections because you can definitely hear the fervor he celebrates.

Putting interplay front and center while delivering a parade of delectable melodies, *Sleeper* is a marvel of commotion. And given the title of the sideways funk opus that is "Chant Of The Soil," yes, it might be just as earthy as some of the discs made by Jarrett's U.S. team.

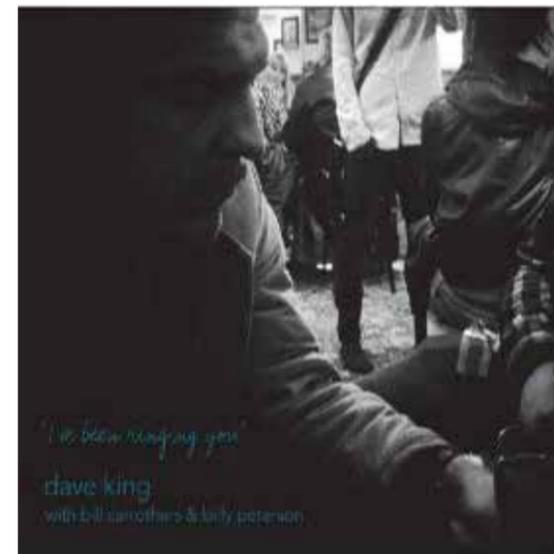
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**Dave King**  
*I've Been Ringing You*  
Sunnyside, CD

Piano trio fans that spent any time with last spring's superb *Sunrise*, by Masabumi Kikuchi, probably like to be wooed by music with a sense of mystery. One of the record's many attractions stem from the unpredictable nature of the band's lines. A steady stream of soft curlicues and bobbing pulses unite, and the slightest of gestures serves as a "solo." The aging Japanese pianist is a master of nuance, and *Sunrise* is as subtle as it was seductive.

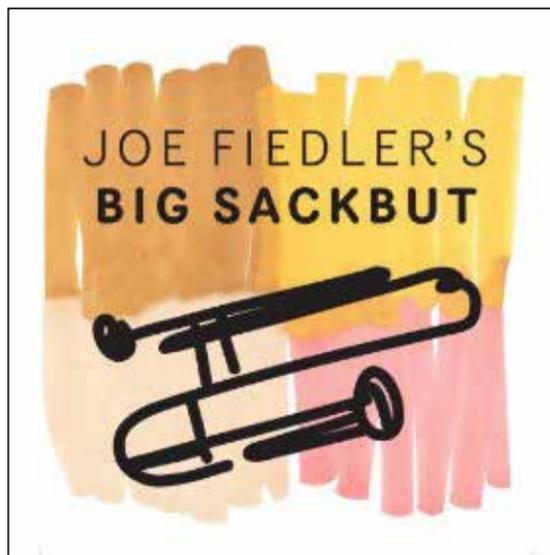
Now, the autumn has a disc to bookend Kikuchi's triumph. Dave King plays drums for The Bad Plus, and in doing so, tasks himself to drive the popular jazz piano trio's often-aggressive pieces. The Bad Plus adores dramatic flourish, and one of King's strongest suits is the judicious aggression he brings to performances. He is a momentum machine.

But *I've Been Ringing You*, made with pianist Bill Carrothers and bassist Billy Peterson, takes the opposite tack. It's a program of sketches. The music inches along in a rather abstract manner, and glows with demure radiance that becomes more and more attractive with each listen.

The tunes are standard fare, yet this exercise in trad repertory is imbued with a sly strategy of making the melodies feel as if they're constantly dissolving. You're able to hum along with Cole Porter's "So In Love" even as its theme consistently flickers in and out of earshot. The essence of "Summer Serenade" is there to be absorbed, but it gets an African vibe that prioritizes the heartbeat designs of King's tom-tom thwacks. Along the way, silence becomes paramount.

Carrothers is unafraid of letting a note linger or allowing negative space to act in his behalf. Peterson's slippery lines provide an ever-shifting bottom that boasts a poetic touch. His sense of description relies on the power of hinting at things. And then there's King himself.

Like a cagey combo of Keith Moon and Paul Motian, the drummer steadily tickles his instrument with subdued finesse. This trio's approach is built on poise and implication, and as "This Nearly Was Mine" drifts by, the essence of the band's approach crystallizes. King's decision to offer the slightest of taps on his cymbals becomes a sage choice that speaks volumes.



### Joe Fiedler's Big Sackbut

Joe Fiedler's Big Sackbut  
Yellow Sound, CD

spent a good chunk of the summer reveling in the rollick of Ray Anderson's Pocket Brass Band. The virtuoso trombonist helms a four-piece outfit that adds sousaphone, trumpet, and drums to his own horn, and on *Sweet Chicago Suite*, it gets raucous with some simple structures. There's plenty of New Orleans in the music; the chatter of polyphony spends a good time in the sun. Brass ensembles can really smack you around when they hit the red zone.

They can also stroke you a bit. Joe Fiedler's Sackbut is a brass-only group that blends three trombones and a tuba. The ensemble's debut contains sufficient oomph, but rather than go for the Crescent City parade vibe, it puts harmony and swoop upfront. With slide maestros Josh Roseman and Ryan Keberle uniting with bottom man Marcus Rojas, the whirl of sound is reminiscent of the World Saxophone Quartet's *Revue* rather than the Dirty Dozen Brass Band's sublime stomp.

This makes the program a bit meatier. There's syncopation in "The Crab," and blues motifs occasionally arise. Nonetheless, from the opening section of "Don Pullen" to the eerie glide of Sun Ra's "A Call For All Demons," Fiedler make a case

for smooth alignment rather than R&B shouting.

A stalwart of the NYC salsa scene, the leader is capable of virtuosic maneuvers. On the new disc, a graceful percolation defines one of Fiedler's favorite tunes from the aforementioned scene, Willie Colon's "Calle Luna, Calle Sol." Rojas keeps the band bouncing and his partners go on a perpetual romp. Previous trio albums like *Sacred Chrome Orb* underscore Fiedler's agility and chops, and both are displayed here. Moves on "Mixed Bag" and "Blabber And Smoke" are thoroughly impressive. But, ultimately, coordination sits highest on Fiedler's agenda. Most of Sackbut's action feels like a blend, not a battle.

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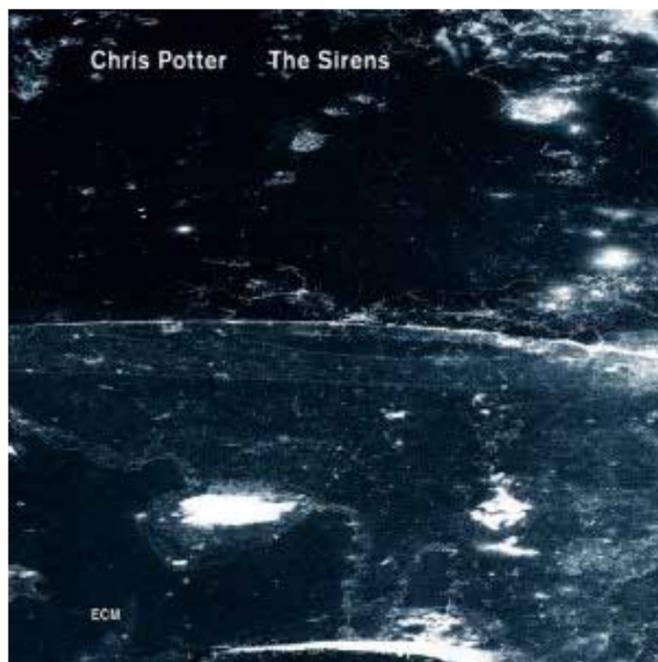
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**Chris Potter**

*The Sirens*  
ECM, CD

There's a difference between true drama and mere tumult, and on Chris Potter's first disc for ECM, one of the preeminent saxophonists of his generation makes a decided stance to strive for the real deal. Potter's skills can take him anywhere.

©Photo by Tamas Talaber



When not working with Pat Metheny or Dave Holland, he's examining the friction points that lie between knotty time signatures and gnarled horn lines. His Underground group has come to define a modern jazz lingo that could be deemed math funk. But after rereading Homer's *The Odyssey*, Potter grabbed himself a new cohort, wrote himself a handful of tunes that veer away from his customary sound, and hit the studio. *The Sirens* is a turn of the page.

With his imagination on 8 BC, several pieces are built on a steady unfolding of events. Potter's tenor persona has always been piercing while still waxing supple, and the balance of the two extremes is one of things that make a few of these pieces so disarming. Bop remains the dominant lingo in his work, but here things are stretched out a bit. This album celebrates long tones, breathing room, and the exploration that often binds them. Several songs reveal themselves slowly, and seem all the more captivating for it.

The title track, in particular, is a lesson in seduction. With bassist Larry Grenadier bowing, Potter's bass clarinet invites listeners into a misty lament that glistens with Craig Taborn's piano. Just when everything seems to be a smidge too mystical, the tenor arrives. Its keening soliloquy updates us on what true lyricism constitutes.

There are moments when things seem a bit overwrought. But in the large, Potter and company (drummer Eric Harland adds nuanced flair and pianist David Virelles plays celeste and harmonium) fill their elaborations with a heart-and-soul approach that makes the individual pieces cohere as part of a genuinely identifiable whole. It's great to hear him come up with such a richly emotional piece.

# TERJE RYPDAL ODYSSEY IN STUDIO & IN CONCERT

ECM

## Terje Rypdal

*Odyssey In Studio & In Concert*  
ECM, 3CD box set

have vivid memories of being frustrated by Terje Rypdal's early ECM work when it was first released in the 1970s. The Norwegian guitarist's use of extended pieces is alluring, and the textures he utilizes to populate such canvases are culled from provocative forebears like Jimi Hendrix, Larry Coryell, and John McLaughlin.

But there was something histrionic about Rypdal's approach. Records such as *What Comes After* and *Odyssey* had an orchestral scale often filled with the perpetual wail of the leader's instrument. In his liner notes to this new three-disc collection of work by the guitarist's Odyssey band, John Kelman calls Rypdal's tone "ice-edged." True enough. Both bleak and exultant, pieces like "Adagio" are spacey micro-symphonies that are as chilly as they are unique. In the early days, I was on the fence about how emotionally compelling I found it all.

The arrival of this box re-piqued my interest and, 35 years on,

Rypdal's music speaks to me with more heart than I first recognized. Enclosed is the full double album of *Odyssey*, with the initially un-included and subsequently rarified track "Rolling Stone," which lives up its legendary status by forging a slippery union between Miles Davis' homages to Duke Ellington ("He Love Him Madly") and Jack Johnson ("Yesternow"). The long tones of that guitar wail I mention above are indeed red-blooded; it's rather unmistakable when you hear all these tracks together. Coming after the trombone musings of Torbjorn Sunde on "Ballade," Rypdal's fierce pining is gripping stuff.

So are the seven pieces that

comprise the *Unfinished Highballs* disc that rounds out this release. It's the Odyssey quartet in cahoots with the Swedish Radio Jazz Group, a 15-piece orchestra that provides Rypdal with a chance to truly test his composing/arranging chops. Recorded in '76 and re-released here for the first time, it's an engaging session that incorporates notions from the work of Bernard Herrmann, Gil Evans, and George Russell (one of the guitarist's first employers). The swirl of "Scarlet Mistress" is where Rypdal hits his peak, that howl of his taking on a good deal of élan, and wisely sharing the turf with some truly colorful backdrops. ●

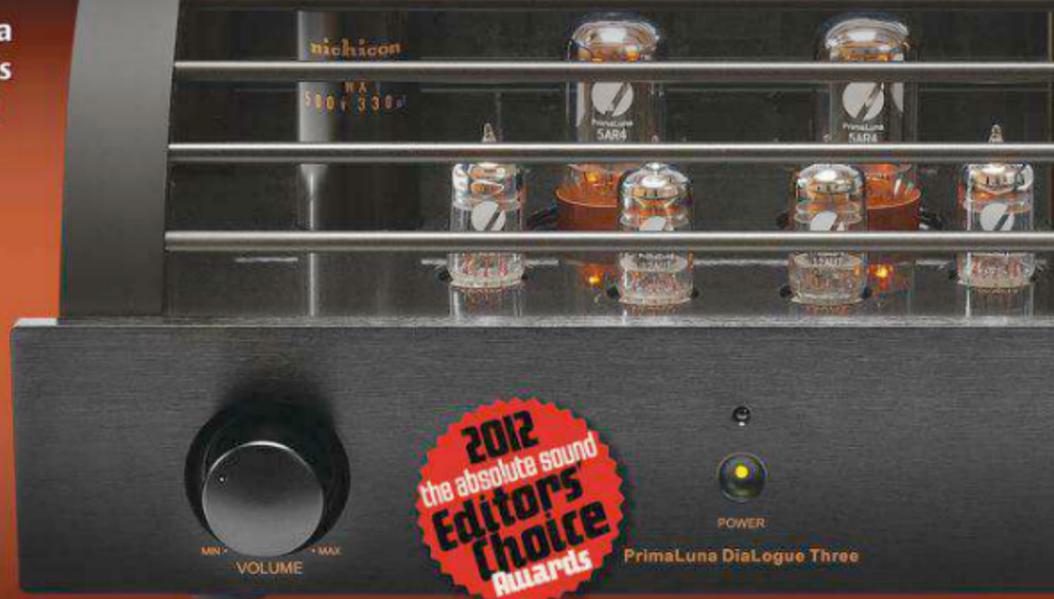
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